

Joseph Begley

Memory, Trauma, Mythistory: The Enduring Legacy of the
French Revolution in French Prose Fictions, 1789-1853

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the degree of D. Phil in Medieval
and Modern languages

University of Oxford

Joseph Begley, New College, 2025

D.PHIL SHORT ABSTRACT

**Memory, Trauma, Mythistory: The Enduring Legacy of the French
Revolution in French Prose Fictions, 1789-1853**

The following thesis explores the literary representation and memorialization of the French Revolution, primarily in prose fiction, from 1789 to approximately 1850. I consider how the works in question contribute to the development of a broad revolutionary memory, towards what might be described as a national myth. Engaging with theoretical frameworks developed by scholars such as Pierre Nora, Jacques Le Goff, and Hayden White, among others, my study examines the function of revolutionary memory, arguing that the works I discuss reimagine, memorialize, and ultimately mythologize the Revolution. The thesis examines the representational methods and ideological underpinnings of key authors, beginning with counterrevolutionary and ‘eyewitness’ literary accounts by writers such as Joseph de Maistre, Nicolas-Edmé Rétif de la Bretonne, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. It then moves through epistolary fiction and early Romanticism (Germaine de Staël, Sénac de Meilhan, Chateaubriand), Romantic historicism, and into the mid-century realist and national-historical mythologies of Balzac and Michelet, respectively. A recurring motif is the tension between personal experience, historical record, and imaginative reconstruction—a tension that becomes central to the literary memory of the Revolution. Rather than treating these texts as isolated responses, my thesis argues for a more unified approach, emphasizing the Revolution’s pervasive symbolic presence across genres and decades. It ultimately suggests that the French Revolution became a foundational site of literary production, shaping the imaginative possibilities of fiction and history alike. In doing so, the study reconsiders the ways literary texts served as loci of national memory, trauma, and identity formation in post-revolutionary France.

Joseph Begley, New College, 2025

D.PHIL LONG ABSTRACT

**Memory, Trauma, Mythistory: The Enduring Legacy of the French
Revolution in French Prose Fictions, 1789-1853**

The following thesis offers a sustained inquiry into how the French Revolution was represented, remembered, and transformed through (predominantly) prose literary works from 1789 to circa 1850. It is not primarily a study of revolutionary politics, nor even of the Revolution's direct influence on literature, but rather a project devoted to investigating how literature itself preserves, shapes, and remakes the historical experience and memory of the Revolution. Working across genres—epistolary novels, Romantic and realist fictions, philosophical treatises, and formal histories—I begin from the premise that the literary responses to the Revolution constitute a significant motif in the literature of the period. The texts examined do not, however, merely depict the Revolution; they respond to it, mourn and mythologize it, dispute it, and attempt to make sense of its aftermath. Whereas existing studies often focus on literary responses to the Revolution within discrete genres or political frameworks, this thesis takes as its starting point the premise that a more comprehensive literary-historical understanding of the Revolution should cross both chronological and formal boundaries. The result is a method that privileges representation over ideology and traces the construction of memory across a broad spectrum of texts. One of the central ideas proposed in my thesis is that the French Revolution generated a crisis not only of sovereignty and society, but of narrative and meaning. The works under consideration are unified by their shared effort to mediate that crisis. They reimagine historical events, transform political rupture into symbolic form, and seek to preserve something of the Revolution's meaning through literary representation. At the same time, they wrestle with the limits of representation—especially in the face of trauma.

The first chapter focuses on the epistolary novel, that quintessential genre of the eighteenth century, and explores how it was transformed during and after the Revolution to accommodate a new kind of historical consciousness. The chapter examines how personal correspondence, both fictional and quasi-fictional, provided a means of narrating revolutionary experience from the inside. Through the lens of several key texts, the chapter argues that the epistolary form became an important mode of processing the trauma of rupture, exile, and displacement. These letters do more than record events; they evoke the emotional and psychological consequences of upheaval, particularly for those whose identities and social positions were rendered uncertain by 1789 and its aftermath. The epistolary novel's emphasis on immediacy and interiority proved especially well-suited to expressing disorientation and loss, and it is in this genre that we see the emergence of a literary mode that would become central to the postrevolutionary imagination.

In the second chapter, the focus progresses to early French Romanticism, and especially to the idea of trauma as a defining feature of the postrevolutionary French literary landscape. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Deborah Jenson, this chapter argues that many Romantic texts enact what Caruth describes as “the story of a wound that cries out”—a narrative form in which the source of injury is both revealed and obscured, visible and concealed. While the Revolution is not always explicitly referenced in these works, it casts a long shadow over them. The concept of *le mal du siècle*, as exemplified in texts by Chateaubriand and others, is treated here as a response to historical trauma, a melancholic register in which political catastrophe is transposed into spiritual malaise. These texts are not merely symptomatic of trauma; they actively theorize it, often by affixing it onto landscapes (real or imagined), or by encoding it in figures of exile, illness, and lost youth. Through close readings, the chapter demonstrates how literary form becomes a way of managing collective trauma, and how Romantic fiction becomes a repository for displaced historical memory.

The third chapter develops this argument by turning to the figure of the regicide as an archetype of revolutionary trauma. Focusing on two case studies—Ballanche’s *L’Homme sans nom* and Balzac’s *Un épisode sous la Terreur*—it explores how guilt and moral responsibility are distributed, dramatized, and ultimately mythologized in the wake of Louis XVI’s execution. While the regicide is treated differently in each work, both texts confront the question of how a nation, or indeed an individual, lives with the memory of such an act. The regicide becomes a synecdoche for the Revolution itself: an event which defies easy explanation, demanding atonement and continuing to trouble the national conscience. Through these literary representations, the regicide becomes not merely a historical episode but a mythic moment—a “wound” in Caruth’s sense, whose full significance cannot be assimilated in real time, but which reemerges in narrative.

If the first three chapters explore the traumatic legacy of the Revolution and its literary sublimation, the fourth chapter turns to Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* to examine the role of memory in a different key. Here, the Revolution functions less as trauma than as persistent background, a structural and thematic force that shapes characters’ identities and choices. This chapter introduces the notion of the “revolutionary backstory”—the idea that characters and events in Balzac’s fiction are subtly, yet powerfully affected by the past. Balzac does not so much depict the Revolution as he conjures its aftereffects, embedding its memory in family histories, material disputes, and political ambitions. This is a subdued form of literary memory, one that suggests how profoundly the Revolution continued to shape French society well into the July Monarchy and beyond. Through Balzac’s layered narratives, the Revolution is remembered not through spectacle but according to its sedimented consequences—ghostly, infrastructural, and often invisible.

The fifth chapter explores how memory crystallizes into myth. It takes as its central case study the figure of Charlotte Corday, tracing her transformation from historical assassin to symbolic martyr. Starting with her absence in David’s *Marat assassiné* and her apotheosis in André Chénier’s verse, the chapter follows her evolving representation through visual and

textual media. Corday emerges as a contested figure—at once condemned and canonized—whose memory is shaped by the competing imperatives of republican heroism, feminine virtue, and moral ambiguity. The chapter examines how her image is mobilized in works of history, poetry, and fiction, showing how she comes to represent a myth of redemptive violence, while demonstrating how these commemorative narratives function as tools of both memory and ideological instruction.

The final chapter turns primarily to Jules Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française*, a monumental synthesis that seeks not only to narrate the Revolution but to absorb and redirect its memory. Michelet's project is examined as the culmination of many of the tendencies traced in earlier chapters: the fusion of history and fiction, the struggle to represent traumatic scenes, and the transformation of memory into national myth. For Michelet, the Revolution is not merely a historical event; it is a spiritual epic, the birth of the People (*le peuple*) as a historical actor. His history is less a chronicle than a gospel, a narrative in which the Revolution's meaning is stabilized and sanctified. His text functions as both memorial and mythos, a site where the Revolution's contradictions are rendered coherent through a literary imagination committed to republican idealism.

One of the central contributions of this thesis is its theorization of the relationship between memory and myth. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in scholarship, this study distinguishes them in order to better understand their functions. Memory, in this context, refers to the heterogeneous and often fragmented processes by which the past is retained and recalled; processes that are mediated by genre, voice, and form. Myth, by contrast, refers to the symbolic consolidation of memory, the transformation of events into narrative archetypes that serve to unify, inspire, and/or explain. Many of the texts considered here move between these poles: from tentative, often traumatic recollection to inspired mythmaking. What emerges is not a single "myth of the French Revolution," but often a field of competing narratives, each seeking to define the event's meaning and legacy.

At the same time, I am attentive to how literary form mediates historical content. The expressive tools of the letter, the lyrical poem *vis-à-vis* the painting, the novel, and the historical narrative differ markedly from each other, yet all offer ways of engaging with the Revolution's memory. Indeed, one of the claims of this study is that genre itself plays a constitutive role in shaping memory. Just as memory is not neutral or spontaneous—as Pierre Nora argues in his theory of *lieux de mémoire*—so too is literary memory already structured by the conventions and expectations of its form. Whether in the epistolary lament of the émigré, the introspective melancholy of the Romantic hero, or the comprehensive ambitions of the historian, the Revolution is processed through the forms that seek to contain it.

Methodologically, the thesis draws on a combination of literary analysis, intellectual history, and memory studies. Its theoretical framework owes much to the work of Nora, Le Goff, Paul Bénichou, and Giambattista Vico, but also to literary theorists such as Caruth, Jenson, and Katherine Astbury, who provide tools for understanding how the psychic aftershocks of political catastrophe relate to literary representation. The work also engages with contemporary scholarship on historiography and national identity, building on the insights of Hayden White, Ann Rigney, and Lynn Hunt. In particular, it makes a renewed case for a more literary reading of 19th-century historiography, especially with respect to Michelet, whose *Histoire de la Révolution* has often been treated as either history, myth, or indeed as literature.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that the French Revolution was not only a crisis of the state but a crisis of time and representation. It ruptured traditional narratives, introduced new vocabularies of heroism and guilt, and called into question the very means by which the past is recorded and understood. In response, writers turned to fiction—not necessarily to invent, but to reframe. In this light, literature becomes a site not only of escape but of reckoning. The Revolution is represented again and again not because its meaning is fixed, but because it is endlessly generative—of identities, anxieties, memories, and myths.

The originality of the thesis lies in its attempt to treat this entire field of literary representation as a coherent project of memorialization, in which diverse texts participate in a broader cultural effort to make sense of 1789 and its consequences. In doing so, it provides a new perspective on both canonical and marginal works, proposing a model for how literature can be read as a form of historical thought and, conversely, how history might be reconceived in literary terms.

Finally, this project invites further inquiry in several directions. One avenue would be to examine, in similar terms, transnational or comparative representations of the French Revolution, especially in British, German, or American literature of roughly the same period. Another would be to extend the timeline into the later 19th century, tracing the afterlives of the Revolution in the works of writers like Dumas, Sue, Hugo, Sand, Zola, or indeed into the 20th century. More generally, the methods developed here could be applied to other revolutions—1789 as a test case for a broader theory of revolutionary memory. At stake throughout is the question of how literature mediates between history and experience, and how a nation remembers not just what happened, but what it believes is worth remembering.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	10
CHAPTER 1. THE SEEDS OF MEMORY: EPISTOLARY FICTION AND THE PREHISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE REVOLUTION	46
CHAPTER 2. TRAUMA, DISILLUSION, MAL: THE SCARS OF REVOLUTIONARY MEMORY IN EARLY ROMANTICISM	99
CHAPTER 3. WHO KILLED LOUIS XVI? NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE REGICIDES IN BALLANCHE’S <i>L’HOMME SANS NOM</i> AND BALZAC’S <i>UN ÉPISODE SOUS LA TERREUR</i>	149
CHAPTER 4. REVOLUTIONARY BACKSTORY IN <i>LA COMÉDIE HUMAINE</i>	181
CHAPTER 5. ‘UNE FEMME D’UNE NATURE RARE ET SUPÉRIEURE’: CHARLOTTE CORDAY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A REVOLUTIONARY MYTH.....	218
CHAPTER 6. MICHELET’S HEROIC AGE	273
GENERAL CONCLUSION	314
APPENDICES	325
BIBLIOGRAPHY	338

Introduction

Memorial Before Memory

On the eve of the French Revolution, sometime in 1789, an anonymous pamphlet, titled *Le Triomphe des Parisiens*, made its rounds throughout the Capital. If we lend credence to Camille Desmoulins' assessment of the tract, it was almost certainly penned by a disquieted member of the aristocracy. We do not need to take *le vieux Cordelier* at his word, however, for the text clearly expresses its author's political disposition, with only a thin veneer of ironic camouflage.¹ This was a general function of pamphlets in late 1780s France; as Sara Maza explains, "The pamphlet literature of 1788-89 was... written not just, or not primarily, to describe society, but for the purposes of promoting a political agenda."² But what, then, was the political agenda of the author? The rising political turmoil, he proclaims, will soon transform (degenerate) Paris into a vast garden, a pastoral wonderland: "L'herbe croîtra dans les rues, formera une agréable verdure, qui présentera l'aspect d'un jardin anglais."³ This sprawling Eden will reflect a perfectly Rousseauian state of nature, one to which mankind will joyously return, albeit without the comforts, obligations, and livelihoods to which they might have become accustomed:

¹ Camille Desmoulins, *Le vieux cordelier* (Paris: Belin, 2010 [originally published 1793]), p. 137. Desmoulins' full commentary is presented as follows: "Parmi ces brochures dangereuses, il y en a une assez piquante, intitulée: "*Le Triomphe des Parisiens*. " L'auteur voudrait leur faire croire que leur cité va devenir aussi déserte que l'ancienne Babylone, que les Français vont être transformés en un peuple de laboureurs, de jardiniers, et de philosophes, avec le bâton et la besace; que dans six mois l'herbe cachera le pavé de la rue Saint-Denis et de la place Maubert, et que nous aurons des couches de melon sur la terrasse des Tuileries, et des carrés d'oignons dans le Palais-Royal."

² Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 76.

³ Le Tellier (Pseudonym), *Le Triomphe des Parisiens*, (Paris: Chez Cressionnier, 1789), p. 6.

Les carrossiers, les selliers, les bourelliers, les charrons, les vernisseurs, les serruriers, les maréchaux fermeront boutique, et les autres marchands ne vendront rien, et ils feront banqueroute... *Chambres garnies à louer, maison à louer ou à vendre*; et les propriétaires seront ruinés, et les architectes, les maîtres maçons, les tailleurs de pierres, les manœuvres, les carriers mettront leurs dents au croc.⁴

This imagined, postrevolutionary Paris would be effectively un- or rather, decivilized; its men will be without work, impoverished, but perhaps, as a sort of silver lining, not completely ravished by famine.

To answer our question, the author's political agenda in this cleverly Delphic polemic is to pass an indictment on what he perceives as the inevitable consequences of a monumental uprising still, at this point, in utero. The Bastille has not yet been conquered, the royal family is still very much intact, and *Terreur* is not, at this point, 'l'ordre du jour'. *Le triomphe des Parisiens* is, to put it simply, a work of conjecture, the product of a frenzied imagination. In this sense, then, it is a thought experiment of sorts; a *fiction*, but not more than that. This does not, of course, preclude our anonymous nobleman from crafting a narrative before the fact, infusing allegory with prophecy, or perhaps embellishing his augury with a tinge of parable.

When Desmoulin revisits, some five years later, the ideas of this unnamed aristocrat, in the same spirit as his fierce engagement with those of Hébert—*Le père Duchesne*—or any of the other *nouveaux cordeliers*, he does so because the Revolution, beyond its theatre of immediate political conflict, has become a struggle of conceptual, historical proportions. In other words, the Revolution must be ceaselessly defended against each of its ideological enemies, whether on the battlefield, in the Convention or across the pages of journals and newspapers, or perhaps most important, in collective (and individual) memory.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 5.

This responsibility is far more than simply one of maintaining dominion over an historical narrative; it requires constant waves of memorialization, even the construction of mythologies which appeal—or at least intend to appeal—to a broader national identity. The writings and speeches of Desmoulins, of Robespierre and Saint-Just, each reflect this imperative, no less than David's paintings, the *fêtes révolutionnaires*, or the many dramatic works which commemorate the Revolution and its heroes. Regarding the latter, one could not, for instance, read Olympe de Gouges' *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* without recognizing that the play does not simply celebrate the life of the man, but proclaims his apotheosis, reconstructing one of the Revolution's early leaders into an immortal representation of national, indeed universal, virtue. Mirabeau becomes, in the work of de Gouges and her contemporaries, *le Démosthène français*, a pseudo-mythical statesman, or demigod of the republican civic religion. In her study of representations of Mirabeau in revolutionary drama, Jessica Goodman explains that a work such as that of de Gouges (and other revolutionary dramatists) implies "a belief in the durability of the written word and its place in creating history that allows the authors of these texts to rely on their writings to do more than just convey their praise of an individual at a particular moment in time."⁵

Goodman is correct to point out that the very act of historicizing in this manner comes imbued with a gravitas, which extends well beyond the purview of a specific historical moment. Indeed, we can trace this concept, that of the historian who anticipates future readings, to the very origins of historical writing in the western tradition. Does not Thucydides, for instance, state that his history is 'compiled for an everlasting possession', rather than for immediate rewards? One would only wish, therefore, to scrutinize the meaning of 'history' in a context such as that in which Goodman employs it. The word itself, in its typified use, is replete with a set of precepts, particularly in the context of (and

⁵ Jessica Goodman, *Commemorating Mirabeau: 'Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées' and Other Texts*, (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), p. 33. See also: Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice: Trial by theater in the age of the French Revolution*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

adjacent to) mythology and memory: all are modes of preserving the past. Since these terms are at the very heart of our inquiry into the memory and representation of the French Revolution, we should briefly discuss them in the abstract, to better understand how they perform similar functions toward the preservation of the past, and whether it is necessary to sustain or erase any of these semantical and conceptual distinctions.

In his *Scienza Nuova* (1725), Giambattista Vico, echoing a view which he purports to have been common among the earliest poet-theologians, characterizes memory as Mnemosyne, *the mother of the Muses*. According to Vico, “memory has three distinct aspects: memory when it recalls things; imagination when it alters or recreates them; and ingenuity or invention when it orders them in a suitable arrangement or context.”⁶ Each part of this characterization identifies a specific, semi-distinct function of memory; it is, at its foundation a mechanical, cognitive faculty, yet also a more complex action, one which facilitates the abstract processes of representation, and of imagination. Elaborating on this classical explanation, Jacques Le Goff, in his *Histoire et mémoire* (1988), provides a critical historiographical overview of memory, from its earliest functions in preliterate human history, up to the technological present.⁷ For Le Goff memory, whether individual or collective, rudimentary or algorithmic, is the “propriété de conservation de certaines informations”; a means of preserving and representing the past in such a way that it is readily comprehensible to current and indeed, to future, individuals and societies.⁸

If memory in the order of its operations first preserves so to recall, as we see in Vico’s definition, it next serves the functions of the daughter muses: to recall in order to create (or indeed recreate). Memory here facilitates a dialogue between individual and

⁶ Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, ‘trans. by David Marsh’, (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 369.

⁷ See: Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et Mémoire*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). For a study of the development of myth in preliterate societies, see: Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁸ Le Goff, *Histoire et Mémoire*, p. 105.

collective, it is a sociological phenomenon as much as an artistic, creative one. When an artist or writer recreates some moment from the past, communicating the tableau in coherent terms, its constituent symbols both draw from and contribute to a certain compendium of shared glyphs, what Pierre Nora calls ‘la mémoire collective’. This idea of a collective French past was given perhaps its most comprehensive treatment in *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-92), an immense project which Nora both organized and contributed to. Across three volumes and nearly one hundred essays Nora, along with some of France’s most esteemed historians and cultural critics (including Le Goff), set out to define the Nation according to its hallowed symbols and songs, its rituals and monuments, language and literature.⁹ *La Marseillaise*, the Panthéon and its inhabitants, Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, each signifies, according to Nora’s conception, the vigorous, sometimes tendentious or even discriminatory act of memorialization:

Les lieux de mémoire naissent et vivent du sentiment qu’il n’y a pas de mémoire spontanée, qu’il faut créer des archives, qu’il faut maintenir des anniversaires, organiser des célébrations, prononcer des éloges funèbres, notarié des actes, parce que ces opérations ne sont pas naturelles.¹⁰

Since my study is one which focuses on literary representations of the French Revolution, its primary interest is in exploring how the function of memory, such as it is explained by Vico, by de Goff or Nora, might provide us a structure for understanding these representations of the Revolution. Nora in particular frames memory in sufficiently broad terms, so that we need not restrict our scope—as similar studies have done—to a particular genre or author. I contend, furthermore, that whatever generic category a text might fall

⁹ Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République, la Nation I, la Nation II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 23-43.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 29.

into—whether epic, history, the novel, or any other analogous literary modes—there exists a common process of representation wherein some vision of the past is adulterated, molded to conform to the author’s vision in such a way that these symbols can in turn be understood by those who experience or consume a given work. The inherent structural distinctions, which inevitably result from differences in form (for instance, the epistolary novel vis-à-vis historical narrative) are neither innocuous nor paramount to our study. Rather, by concentrating on the literary representation of the particular memory first, as a thing in itself, most generic differences become a sort of canvas upon which a memory is reproduced or reimagined. It is therefore possible, for example, to discuss the 10 August in Germaine de Staël’s *Delphine* in much the same context, within the same broad critical framework, as Michelet’s *Histoire de la Révolution française*, as works that both reimagine the historical Revolution in some way. It is important also to emphasize that while our primary intention is not to annihilate these generic distinctions, it is sometimes necessary to soften the lines of demarcation which might otherwise relegate them to different classes of literature. For the literary-historical memory of the French Revolution during my proposed chronology—1789 to roughly 1850—manifests on such a vast spectrum of genre and medium, often well beyond the frontiers of formal historical narratives, that a preoccupation with generic minutiae would only distract from what I understand to be the far more important consideration, namely how the various representations of the Revolution within these literary works contribute to the formation of a shared memory, what some would call a national myth. It is my view that casting such a relatively wide net will allow us to explore a particular *lieu de mémoire* which most extant scholarship treats not as cohesive or tonic, but rather in terms of its constituent parts.

A study such as this one requires some degree of interdisciplinarity when approaching these texts, one that begins by recognizing the Revolution’s socio-political implications as, on some level, instructive of its broad literary-cultural reverberations. We recall Victor Hugo’s famous preface to the 1824 edition of the *Odes et ballades*, where he explains that the

literature of nineteenth-century France “Peut être en partie le *résultat* de la révolution, sans en être l’*expression*”.¹¹ The arts, culture writ large, politics, and indeed the very configuration (or reconfiguration) of society, are all bound together in a marriage of cause and effect: a “révolution littéraire” caused by the “révolution politique.” As Hugo explains,

La société, telle que l’avait faite la révolution, a eu sa littérature, hideuse et inepte comme elle. Cette littérature et cette société sont mortes ensemble et ne revivront plus. L’ordre renaît de toutes parts dans les institutions; il renaît également dans les lettres.¹²

Hugo effectively highlights in the preface an axiom of the politico-cultural continuum, namely that art is downstream from world historical events such as the French Revolution; there is no Homer without the fall of Troy, no Dante without the civil strife of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, no Chateaubriand without the fall of the Bastille.¹³ Hugo’s preface, for all its interest in the effects of the Revolution on French literature, is rather unconcerned with more overt literary confrontations of the Revolution itself. Homer, Dante, Chateaubriand (and indeed Hugo himself), were not simply molded into artists of a particular type by historical moment; each also wrote *about* those monumental events which shaped their respective ages.

Hugo’s astute observations provide important context to the nature and purpose of my study; it is self-evidently true that such representations of the Revolution as the ones we shall discuss were influenced and instructed by the broader literary and cultural milieux in which they were written. But if the legacy of the Revolution looms conspicuously over the

¹¹ Victor Hugo, *Odes et ballades*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ For a discussion on the relationship between French politics and literature, specifically in relation to Romanticism, see: Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry & Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France: From Anarchism to ‘Action française’*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-29.

literature which followed it, as Hugo claims, surely many writers were compelled to represent and reimagine this vast shadow the event had cast over the nation. Scholarship on this subject, in contrast to work on the political, historical Revolution, is decidedly less comprehensive, certainly more disparate, and almost always hyper-specialized. Grand studies of nineteenth-century French literature (of which there are more than a few) almost always commence with 1789; even in an exceptional case, like Ferdinand Brunetière's *Histoire de la littérature française* (1891-2), whose fourth volume begins in 1800, the first chapter focuses primarily on those early reactions to the French Revolution. As he explains,

La Révolution était faite, mais elle était loin d'être consolidée; on ne se rendait exactement compte ni de ce que l'on voulait, ni de ce que l'on ne voulait plus; le désordre était partout, dans les idées, dans l'administration, dans les mœurs; et partout aussi, sous une fureur de vivre qui se manifestait plus violemment que jamais au sortir de la Terreur, partout on ressentait l'inquiétude du lendemain.¹⁴

Concerned primarily with giving a coherent narrative account of French literature from its origins, Brunetière views the first generation of French romantics—Chateaubriand most of all—as a bridge between classical and modern; a confounding synthesis of *Ancien Régime* and postrevolutionary literary custom, imbued with the scars of a revolution which they are still struggling to comprehend.

The Revolution does not completely vanish into the ether as his narrative proceeds along its course, despite the conspicuous chronological gap from 1790-1800. To the contrary, Brunetière views the generation of writers who experienced the Revolution as its most adept chroniclers, primarily because, as he explains, “ils en avaient reconnu le caractère exceptionnel, ils en avaient aperçu l'élément mystique.”¹⁵ There is a sort of

¹⁴ Ferdinand Brunetière, *Histoire de la littérature française*, vol. 4, (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1919), p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 325.

wisdom in excluding the literature of the Revolution from this type of *longue durée* study. Much like historians of France, many of whom (Michelet most notably) reserve entire volumes for the revolutionary decade, a literary historian-cum-critic like Brunetière likely omits the period because it is so daunting and chaotic. Rather, the solution to this problem of scale is to discuss the effects of the Revolution as they appear in this broader literary tradition across decades, once the dust, so to speak, has begun to settle. This is what Brunetière does; for others, Albert Thibaudet or Paul Bénichou for example, the Revolution is both the generative event and a significant motif in French literature of the nineteenth century. The former, for instance, views the *émigrés* and *émigré* fiction more generally, as exemplars of revolutionary literature, and pioneers of emergent literary vogues:

L'événement littéraire essentiel, pour cette génération, c'est l'émigration. La plupart des valeurs Nouvelles se créent dans l'émigration, ou par elle, ou par la vie à l'étranger... La durée de cette émigration paraît avoir été proportionnée par un destin artiste, comme la crue du Nil, aux besoins de la littérature.¹⁶

This explanation is intuitive, as mass displacement and dispersal of French nationals—particularly the highly literate intelligentsia and those of titled or moneyed privilege—created a de facto network through which ideas could be exchanged and transmitted across national and cultural frontiers.¹⁷

For Bénichou, meanwhile, the Revolution both scars and liberates the burgeoning Romantic psyche; emblazoned into the nation's cultural identity is the image of the

¹⁶ Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2022), pp. 37-8. Originally published posthumously, in 1936.

¹⁷ Recent studies have taken a closer look at these fictions, particularly as they express sentiments of disillusion and 'otherness', and generally that they may be read as primary sources on the *émigré* experience. See, for instance: Mary Ashburn Miller, 'A fiction of the French Nation', *Historical Reflections* (2018), pp. 45-66.

guillotine, the *fêtes révolutionnaires*, which are a source of terror and inspiration. From the so-called *contre-révolution* to Jules Michelet, the writer is simultaneously an observer or chronicler as well as an architect of postrevolutionary French society; this is what is meant by *le sacre de l'écrivain*. Specifically, it is the counterrevolutionaries who lay much of the groundwork for later conceptions of the Revolution; they are for Bénichou precisely what the *émigrés* were for Thibaudet, namely the Evangelists of modern French literature. As he explains,

Le traumatisme révolutionnaire a ébranlé dans la masse du public la foi laïque et humaniste du XVIII^e siècle; ce refroidissement de ferveur, constaté par tant de témoins dès les lendemains de Thermidor, et dont la désuétude croissante des fêtes républicains est le symptôme visible, s'accompagnait naturellement d'un mouvement de retour vers les idées et les façons de sentir traditionnelles qui s'est accentué surtout après Brumaire. Le désaveu de la Révolution et des principes qui l'avaient inspirée, la réfutation des "sophismes" de la foi philosophique et révolutionnaire ont marqué la pensée dominante de l'époque qui a suivi, et fourni à l'État restaurateur, napoléonien, puis bourbonien, la doctrine dont il avait besoin.¹⁸

Bénichou's work attempts to reveal, albeit in a roundabout way, the extent to which the Revolution instructed these generations of French writers; more than the point of commencement for explaining and understanding nineteenth-century French literature, perhaps we can think of the Revolution here as a motif—one of many—which appears frequently, to draw attention back to the first principle; to tie each work, each author together, as part of a greater national literary identity. Yet the Revolution is still

¹⁸ Paul Bénichou, *Romantismes français I: Le sacre de l'écrivain; Le temps des prophètes*, in *Romantismes français*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 111.

conceptualized for the most part as an historical detail, albeit the most significant one. For Bénichou, the Revolution has great influence, surely it shapes and inspires in various ways. But is it memorialized, mythologized? And if so, how? *Romantismes français* (1972-92) does not provide a comprehensive response to such inquiries, but it does offer a useful framework for later scholarship, including my own, by which to address them.

In the years preceding—and indeed the decades since—the Revolution’s bicentennial, questions of national memory, of collective myth, were given more critical (and popular) attention. Beginning largely in the 1970s, historians and critics alike started to engage more with the Revolution in terms not only of its influence on literature, art, and other expressive mediums, but to explore its preservation and recreation in them.¹⁹ Pierre Michel’s *Un mythe romantique: les Barbares* (1981), for instance, examines the titular *barbare*—the ‘internal other’—as an idea that permeates French literature from 1789-1848. This myth, he explains, was not simply born out of the Revolution, but is also reflected as a series of imaginative responses or reactions to it. So too was it a way of understanding, preserving, of memorializing the spirit of that historical moment: “Mythe de rupture et de continuité, le mythe barbare exalte la liberté moderne. Enfant trouvée de la Terreur, elle devient l’héritière légitime mais émancipée, émancipée mais légitime, d’un instinct d’indépendance dont on peut bien discuter l’origine et la nature, mais dont on revendique néanmoins la lointaine filiation.”²⁰ In many ways, then, Michel repurposes the framework of a *longue durée* study, like Bénichou’s, to explain in more conceptually narrow terms the genealogy and development of a particular national myth that is, at its core, fundamentally related to the French Revolution. Michel’s work explains the memory of the Revolution through a mediating lens; perhaps it is best to think of ‘le mythe des barbares’ as a kaleidoscope, one

¹⁹ See, for example, Iris Moon, *Luxury After the Terror*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2022); Iris Moon and Richard Taws (eds.), *Time, Media, and Visuality in Post-Revolutionary France* (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021).

²⁰ Pierre Michel, *Un Mythe Romantique: Les Barbares 1789-1848*, (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1981), p. 127.

which radically alters and transforms its subject into a peculiarly resonant abstraction, thus producing a second order myth.

Where scholarship had previously tended to take for granted that the Revolution played an integral role in shaping nineteenth-century French literature—while saying little about how this foundational event was illuminated in the written word—a new wave of criticism first recognized (and continues to explore) the need for such studies which take the Revolution as a memory of first order significance in French literary works. In order to expand the scope of such research, it was necessary that important, primary texts were made more readily accessible to interested scholars, and to a broader readership. This meant republishing literary works relevant to the Revolution's memory, many of which had been out of print for decades, in some cases for centuries. The years 1988-89 alone saw updated critical editions of several 'rediscovered' works, including Jean-Paul Marat's only novel, *Les aventures du jeune comte Potowski*, the memoirs of Jean-Baptist de Louvet, a *Pléiade* edition of the Marquis de Sade's novels, the collected works of Isabelle de Charrière, and Alexandre Dumas' *Ingénue*, an historical romance set during the Terror, to name only a few. Rétif de la Bretonne's *Nuits révolutionnaires*, meanwhile, which had been republished a decade prior, was adapted into a television miniseries in 1989 by the French writer-director Charles Brabant.

Along with this deluge of reprinted fictions, critics began to reexamine texts through the lens of revolutionary memory, and 'memory studies' more broadly. Béatrice Didier, in her *Écrire la Révolution* (1989), explores literature of the revolutionary decade in precisely these terms, reading the texts as both *of* and *about* the Revolution.²¹ That the Marquis de Sade, for instance, wrote *Aline et Valcour* during this period is no profound insight on its own. But what does he think about the Revolution? And how do these thoughts appear, of all places, in an epistolary novel which was written in part, we are told, while he was

²¹ See: Béatrice Didier, *Écrire la Révolution, 1789-1799*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989).

incarcerated in the Bastille? These are the sorts of questions Didier addresses, with the apparent goal of establishing a new framework for thinking about the Revolution strictly in terms of its representation in literary works. The blueprint for this she presents in another collection of essays, *La Littérature de la Révolution française*, published for the bicentennial. Here Didier charts a course for subsequent generations of scholars to think about the Revolution as an important literary motif, and of the texts themselves as powerful channels through which the nineteenth century's formative *mémoire collective* could develop and proliferate.²²

If Didier's research highlights the need for more critical attention to be paid to literary representations of the Revolution, scholarship of the last few decades has answered her call. The French Revolution, she claims, had long been neglected in literary scholarship; this, to be sure, is no longer the case. The work of Jean-Clément Martin and Guillaume Mazeau, although not singularly focused on "fictional" representations of the Revolution, nevertheless exemplify the potential of interdisciplinarity, of incorporating literary sources into historical scholarship. Mazeau's *Le Bain de l'histoire* uses literature to both narrative and critical effect; the historical event—Marat's assassination—is scrupulously reexamined in terms of its representation in art and literature, throughout the two centuries since 13 July 1793.²³ Similarly, Martin has published numerous works which reframe the Revolution according to a certain national mythos; the historical Terror, for instance, possesses in his view all the requisite components of a national myth, one which inspires the artistic imagination by virtue of its historical character and subsequent memorialization.²⁴ Research by Deborah Jenson and Katherine Astbury, meanwhile, has explored the more subtle characteristics and effects of the revolutionary experience as expressed in literary works of the revolutionary decade and beyond. Specifically, Astbury's *Narrative Responses to the Trauma*

²² Béatrice Didier, *La littérature de la Révolution française*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

²³ Guillaume Mazeau, *Le bain de l'histoire: Charlotte Corday et l'attentat contre Marat 1793-2009*, (Seysel: Champ Vallon, 2009).

²⁴ See, for ex: Jean-Clément Martin, *Les Échos de la Terreur*, (Paris: Belin, 2018).

of the French Revolution discusses the ‘hidden’ influences on this literature, explaining how writers altered or adapted their work in reaction to 1789; a reflection, as the title suggests, of the trauma inflicted by the Revolution.²⁵

Conversely, studies which focus more on the specific author, like Ronnie Butler’s *Balzac and the French Revolution* and René-Alexandre Courteix’s *Balzac et la Révolution française*, approach questions of literary-historical representation from an opposing pole, one where the artist’s invocation of the past—in this case Balzac’s use of the Revolution—is considered amidst the peculiar circumstances of that writer’s corpus.²⁶ Butler, for example, discusses the ubiquitous theme of “class opposition” in the *Comédie humaine* as it appears along a sort of historical continuum, the origins of which one finds in revolutionary antagonisms. Bourgeois and aristocrat, *acquéreur* and *émigré*; these terms, as they are used in the postrevolutionary Balzacian universe, conform seamlessly to their historical precursors: revolution and counter-revolution.²⁷

This sort of author-centric study is by no means restricted to novelists; the work of Linda Orr and Ann Rigney reimagines the ways we read and discuss the grand nineteenth-century historians of the Revolution; Michelet, Lamartine, and Louis Blanc in particular. Building on the work of Alice Gérard some decades earlier, Orr and Rigney explore the literary qualities of these narrative histories.²⁸ In *Headless History*, Orr goes so far as to theorize that they fill a conspicuous void in French literature of the period, that “in France there was no *Tale of Two Cities*, *Danton’s Death*... Even Hugo’s astoundingly long, hallucinatory poem (written in 1857, published 1881) called “La Révolution” depicts not the

²⁵ Katherine Astbury, *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2012). See also: Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001).

²⁶ René-Alexandre Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, (Paris: PUF, 1997).

²⁷ Ronnie Butler, *Balzac and the French Revolution*, (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 18.

²⁸ See, for ex.: Alice Gérard, *La Révolution française, mythes et interprétations 1789-1970*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1970); Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Revolution at all.”²⁹ Following the theoretical framework of critics like Hayden White and Lionel Gossman, Orr and Rigney propose radical new interpretations of these histories, showing how we might think about them as both historical narratives and literary works.

The work of Rigney and Orr touches upon one of the major obstacles I have faced, particularly while developing the bibliographical framework for the following study. Besides the constraints of chronology, to which a greater degree of flexibility can be permitted, the question of what sorts of texts to include—and which to exclude—have proven to be a greater challenge. I have therefore settled upon the term ‘fictions’ as the most appropriate limiting principle for this study. By ‘fictions’, I defer to Northrop Frye, who in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), attempts to develop an encompassing terminological equivalent to *poetry*; the word can be understood according to Frye’s definition, and in the context which I use it, as any work of “literary art in prose.”³⁰ This characterization of “fictions”, however wanting we might find it to be, solves at least one central problem, by necessarily allowing us to move more freely between genres, while never losing sight of the French Revolution as our central point of interest. But why, one might ask, is such a freedom of movement important? I will first refer to Paul Veyne, who in his *Comment on écrit l’histoire* (1971), offers a polemic contra historical writing, against history as a concept, in what has become in modern usage its colloquial sense:

L’abîme qui sépare l’historiographie antique, avec son optique étroitement politique, de notre histoire économique et sociale est énorme; mais il n’est pas plus grand que celui qui sépare l’histoire d’aujourd’hui de ce qu’elle pourrait être demain. Un bon moyen de s’en rendre compte est d’essayer d’écrire un roman historique, de même que la bonne manière de mettre à l’épreuve une grammaire

²⁹ Linda Orr, *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 17.

³⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 303.

descriptive est de la faire fonctionner à rebours dans une machine à traduire. Notre conceptualisation du passé est si réduite et sommaire que le roman historique le mieux documenté hurle le faux dès que les personnages ouvrent la bouche ou font un geste.³¹

By using the historical novel as a foil to the rigid definition of history, Veyne seeks to erode what he views as specious, arbitrary, and subjective generic distinctions; we can apply the same reasoning, as Hayden White does, to fictions of any sort. In his *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), White argues that the historian and novelist engage in a near-identical creative process, organizing facts and ideas into a coherent narrative.³² I concur generally with White, Frye, and Veyne, with the idea that certain prose texts can be understood in principle according to shared generative *literary* qualities, as fictions, despite varying degrees of “truthfulness” or historical “accuracy”, or differences in structure or style. Works like those I shall discuss in the chapters that follow are similar because each says *something* about the subject in question (the Revolution); we are interested in what it is they have to say.

In the prior century’s *longue durée* literary histories, those of Brunetière, Thibaudet, and Bénichou, the premise that the labours of the historian exist within much the same superstructure as those of the novelist, or indeed the mythographer, is taken largely for granted, but this vital point is, in my view, insufficiently elaborated upon. No concrete terminological or conceptual framework is offered, which might integrate these diverse literary modes into a common network of artistic expression. Thibaudet discusses Michelet in terms of his contributions as “no[tre] plus grand artiste classique de l’histoire” but his broad survey of nineteenth-century literature affords only limited space to enlarge upon this

³¹ Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire*, (Paris: Points, 2015), pp. 40-1.

³² Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

important point.³³ Semiotic studies fill in some of the gaps left by a literary historian like Thibaudet; Barthes' 'effet de réel', for example, does identify some degree of intergeneric congruity, but in service of a theoretical-aesthetic, not necessarily a thematic, claim. Michelet and Flaubert—historian and novelist—both engage in a similar process of representation, but that which they choose to represent in their works, the particulars of past and plot, respectively, is treated as largely incidental.³⁴ However, once scholarship further narrows its thematic scope, as in the recently published collection of essays, *Fictions de la Révolution: 1789-1912*, we approach a more coherent, 'subject-oriented' justification for this type of cross-genre intertextuality. As the work's editors Jean-Marie Roulin and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin point out, one can at least displace the problematics of genre when discussing a topic like literary representations of the French Revolution. It is no coincidence, then, that Roulin and Samindayar-Perrin curate a selection of articles which places historians alongside novelists and prose writers of all sorts. And while no explicit definition of *fictions* is provided, its terminological utility is thoughtfully discussed in the introductory article, 'La Révolution, machine à fiction', wherein they explain the potential insights to be gained from this *mélange* of genres: "Les procédés fictionnels... ouvrent de nouvelles perspectives sur la Révolution et remettent en cause la distinction entre réel et imaginaire, la frontière entre histoire et fiction, en introduisant, par exemple, la conjecture dans des échappées vers l'histoire du possible."³⁵

³³ Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2022), p. 300-305. See also: Lionel Gossman 'Michelet and the French Revolution', in *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art*, ed. by James A. W. Heffernan (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1992), pp. 81-105.

³⁴ See: Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', in *Essais critiques IV: Le Bruissement de la langue*, (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 179-87.

³⁵ Jean-Marie Roulin and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin, 'La Révolution, machine à fiction', in *Fictions de la Révolution: 1789-1912*, ed. by Jean-Marie Roulin and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018), p. 18.

The French Revolution defined and shaped national culture, politics, and memory to such an extent that it seems redundant to say; yet literary fictions written in France during the first half of the nineteenth century, which are *primarily* about the Revolution, as Linda Orr notes, are surprisingly rare. Excepting the narrative histories, of which more than a few were written during this period, there are but a handful of ‘revolutionary fictions.’ This is not to suggest that one must turn over every stone just to find some obscure work that makes fleeting mention of the Bastille; at the very least, the Revolution is a supremely important motif in the cultural-literary spirit of the period. This fact, namely the Revolution’s broad yet often limited presence in the literature of the period, has instructed my selection of works relevant to this study. While I have consulted a relatively large corpus, more critical attention has generally been given to those literary texts which include sustained engagement with the “idea” of the Revolution, and a (sometimes implicit) recognition of its memory as an important component of postrevolutionary French culture. It is useful to think of memory, in this respect, as a sort of omnipresent character, or indeed as a recurring theme. The Revolution might, for example, appear as a protagonist, whose heroic ideal has given birth to a new world. It may likewise be a villain who has destroyed France, sullyng its once glorious stature; or perhaps a minor figure, haunting the backstories of all the nation’s citizens. Both real and imagined characters alike partake in this act of memorialization.³⁶ This is the sense in which we can see the development of a pervasive national mythos, one that is, as I hope shall become clear throughout the course of this thesis, the very bedrock of modern France’s cultural identity.

³⁶ This is a view which is most clearly articulated by Jules Michelet and, some decades later by the historian Augustin Cochin, in his posthumously published *Les Sociétés de pensée et la Démocratie modern* (1925). According to François Furet, “Tous les deux [Michelet et Cochin] ont vu que le seul héros de la Révolution, c’est la Révolution elle-même. Mais là où Michelet chante une force immense, ingouvernable, impensée mais bénie, Cochin analyse un mécanisme.” François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 301.

Having established much of the broad theoretical and terminological framework for my research, I shall now apply such concepts to concrete representations of the Revolution, commencing this study by looking at two radically different fictions, both contemporary to the Revolution: Joseph de Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* (1797) and Nicolas-Edmé Rétif de la Bretonne's *Nuits révolutionnaires* (c. 1790-4). These two works are emblematic of precisely the sort of historical memory which my research seeks to understand and explain. Importantly, de Maistre and Rétif approach the Revolution as a subject of memory from ostensibly different frames of reference; one from afar, the other as a material witness. In spite of this difference, we find in both texts what I would argue is a common revolutionary *mythology*.

Prophecy and Observation

“Dans les ouvrages de l’homme, tout est pauvre comme l’auteur: les vues sont restreintes, les moyens raides, les ressorts inflexibles, les mouvements pénibles et les résultats monotones.”³⁷ Of all Joseph de Maistre’s “considerations”, it is this one which most clearly expresses his understanding of the French Revolution in terms of its causes and effects. From this premise, that all of man’s creations are in some manner corrupt and inelegant without God’s supple chain there to keep us from straying, de Maistre builds a grand narrative of what is, in his view, the most catastrophic of events. Replete with villains and scoundrels, victims and hapless dupes, *Considérations sur la France* has maintained its relevance since it was written in 1796, in spite of its outmoded providential explanation of historical cause and effect, not simply because the author’s unfalsifiable philosophy of history is dressed up with a dazzling style and narration, but by the way this stylistic flourish helps to

³⁷ Joseph de Maistre, ‘Considérations sur la France’, in *Œuvres*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Bouquins, 2007), p. 199.

transform the work into something which, while at least not deliberately a fiction, or a work espousing a revolutionary mythos, nevertheless assumes fundamental structural and thematic qualities which one could only attribute to a spark of this sort of creative, artistic genius—one which is not unlike that of our greatest novelists, or even our mythical rhapsodes. To understand de Maistre’s brilliance as a writer, it is not enough to consider his ideas as though they were atomized things, distinct from the style which he employs as a means of conveyance; substance and form must be taken in concert with each other. This is to say that it is necessary to give credence to his treatment of the Revolution according to his fantastical philosophy of history, while also examining the author’s literary imagination, from which sprouts an earnest, if occasionally hyperbolic, poetics of throne and altar.

No one is spared by the incorporeal force of divine providence that dominates de Maistre’s account of the Revolution. This celestial superintendence reigns over temporal affairs, rewarding adherence to the ordained telos, while punishing, without prejudice, any deviation. Thus, the Revolution, which is itself a holy rebuke of those corrosive ideas that the unwitting French masses embraced and exalted—enlightenment philosophy, reformation, and science—has swept up in its cascading billow innocent and guilty alike, with little distinction:

Depuis longtemps on n’avait vu une punition aussi effrayante, infligée à un aussi grand nombre de coupables. Il y a des innocents, sans doute, parmi les malheureux... mais qu’il est peu de Français, parmi ceux qu’on appelle *victimes innocentes de la Révolution*, à qui leur conscience n’ait pu dire: *Alors, de vos erreurs voyant les tristes fruits, Reconnaissez les coups que vous avez conduits.*³⁸

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 203. The Racine quote in the text is from *Iphigénie*, Act. V, Scene 2, 1607-8.

De Maistre's style sharpens his philosophical bent, adorning the Revolution, as we see in the quote above, with a cloak of linguistic profundity that gives the text a timbre of archaic, holy vengeance—of *Hubris* and *Nemesis*—while emphasizing the overarching moral proclamation by invoking the words of one of France's greatest writers. This passage, like many in the *Considérations*, ties together historical discourse with sublime poetics, conveying an unmistakable affect, in other words, of a mythological account.

It is therefore intuitive to discuss the *Considérations* as a literary work, or as a text which contains literary designs. If de Maistre himself did not intend or anticipate such a reading, he is at least unambiguous in his treatment of the Revolution as a grand tragedy, one best viewed—as indeed he understood it—through the lens of the great literary artists; of Euripides, Racine, or indeed of Shakespeare. He is all too eager, for instance, to quote Hamlet in reference to the Regicide: 'The cease of majesty dies not alone; but like a gulf, doth draw what's near with it.'³⁹ De Maistre even goes so far as to reimagine himself as the spiritual incarnation of a sort of poet-Cassandra, stirred by the demoniac Revolution to admonish humanity. As he explains:

Je me sens transporté, comme le Barde sublime de l'Angleterre, dans un monde intellectuel; je vois l'ennemi du genre humain séant au manège et convoquant tous les *esprits mauvais* dans ce nouveau *Pandémonium*; j'entends distinctement *il rauco suon delle tartaree trombe*; je vois tous les vices de la France accourir à l'appel, et je ne sais si j'écris une allégorie.⁴⁰

Seemingly in a state of disbelief, de Maistre is unsure of where imagination and reality are demarcated; where history ends, and poetry begins. This is perhaps why he defers so frequently to poets and their verse—to Hamlet, Milton, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*—

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 225.

and not to Matthew or Luke, or to any scripture (*Considérations* contains no direct quotations from the Bible). Fascinating indeed that a text which frames the Revolution as “le combat à outrance du christianisme et du philosophisme” would yield so much conceptual ground to the wisdom of great literary figures in lieu of scripture, but it is further evidence that de Maistre is immersed in (and heavily influenced by) the literary culture of his time.⁴¹ He is certainly not alone in this sort of thinking; in the *Avant-propos* to *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798-9), for example, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, himself an accomplished playwright, exclaims that such a momentous epoch desperately needs chroniclers of great imaginative talents: “Sans doute, pour peindre tant de contrastes, il faudrait un historien comme Tacite ou un poète comme Shakespeare.”⁴² Mercier goes even further than de Maistre in this regard, describing the revolutionary *sectionnaires* as a sort of Globe Theatre, which “Ressemblent à celui de Shakespeare, où des scènes burlesques se trouvent à côté de scènes tragiques.”⁴³

For both Mercier and de Maistre, this sort of comparison is meant to emphasize the Revolution’s dramatic nature, although it must be said that the latter does so in service of a divine end. First, de Maistre intends to show that Christianity is vindicated, in principle and in practice, because it inspires such profound and moral works of art, as those which he cites. These sublime texts reveal, in other words, holy truth as effectively as any written word. This is a view which anticipates, or is at least kindred with, Chateaubriand’s *Génie du Christianisme*.⁴⁴ Consequently, *Considérations* reflects this very principle; de Maistre’s work must, more precisely, bear a fruit which reflects the faith from which its tree has sprung; it must be as elegant, beautiful, poetic as its thesis; it must contain a beauty and cohesiveness which, importantly, is completely absent in, antithetical to, the French Revolution; it must be literary.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 229.

⁴² Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, in *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit*, ed. by Jean-François Leca (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), p. 378.

⁴³ Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, p.562.

⁴⁴ See: Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

De Maistre's elegant style, to which we have already alluded, serves more than a decorative function. Take for instance the opening salvo of *Considérations*, which is a response to—or, more precisely, a correction of—that astonishingly seductive first line of Rousseau's *Contrat social* (1762) “l'homme est né libre et partout il est dans les fers”: “Nous sommes tous attachés au trône de l'Être suprême par une chaîne souple, qui nous retient sans nous asservir.”⁴⁵ De Maistre here weaponizes Rousseau's own literary gifts, coopting his ingenious phrasing, then using it to undermine the original meaning. But style is more than simply flowery prose and clever rhetorical turns; much like those works from which he drew so much inspiration—Shakespeare, Racine, and the Homeric epics—de Maistre uses a certain type of language to illuminate historical events, to elevate them into his broad celestial conflict in such a manner so as to transform the Revolution into a sort of national proto-myth, where men are engaged in a (futile) conflict with the divine (although they are oblivious to their own futility). Revolutionary France is simply the most recent, perhaps the most devastating, field of battle in this ongoing war. And at the heart of this conflict, and of de Maistre's revolutionary ætiology, is the benevolent monarch, Louis XVI.

The king figures so centrally in de Maistre's narrative of the Revolution, that he comes to represent the very essence of what is good and holy. Of course, this means that he must be sacrificed for the sake of providence; consequently, his death is a crime for which each citizen bears some guilt. As de Maistre explains,

Il faut encore une observation importante: c'est que tout attentat commis contre la souveraineté, *au nom de la nation*, est toujours plus ou moins un crime national; car c'est toujours plus ou moins la faute de la Nation, si un nombre quelconque de factieux s'est mis en état de commettre le crime en son nom. Ainsi, tous les

⁴⁵ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, p. 199. For more on the often-complicated relationship between de Maistre and Rousseau, see: Graeme Garrard, “Rousseau, Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment”, *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): pp. 97-120.

Français, sans doute, n'ont pas *voulu* la mort de Louis XVI; mais l'immense majorité du peuple a *voulu*, pendant plus de deux ans, toutes les folies, toutes les injustices, tous les attentats qui amenèrent la catastrophe du 21 janvier.⁴⁶

Collective guilt binds each citizen of the French nation, for all time, to the Revolution; de Maistre does not invoke scripture here, but echoes of Matthew's blood libel are clear.⁴⁷ All are condemned, but the Jacobins, along with the other regicides and their ideological forebears, those enlightened *philosophes*, are reserved a distinct place in the author's narrative, primarily as instruments of providence, although we can call them progenitors of history's march, for they serve the same function. "Ces hommes, excessivement médiocres", de Maistre explains, "exercèrent sur une nation coupable le plus affreux despotisme dont l'histoire fasse mention, et sûrement ils étaient les hommes du royaume les plus étonnés de leur puissance."⁴⁸

Robespierre, however mediocre he may have been according to de Maistre, nevertheless enjoys an especially infamous place among the Revolutionary rabble, having orchestrated the Terror; no other revolutionary executed such prodigious terror upon the nation: "Le génie infernal de Robespierre pouvait seul opérer ce prodige."⁴⁹ The Jacobin leader becomes in the *Considérations* almost a force of nature, a demoniac butcher who continues to possess the Nation years after his physical death:

C'est toujours Robespierre qui gagne les batailles dans ce moment; c'est son despotisme de fer qui conduit les Français à la boucherie et à la victoire. C'est en

⁴⁶ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, p. 204.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Matthew 27:25: 'All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!" It might be said that de Maistre uses republican language here (Nation, for example) to condemn "citizens"; so long as the monarchy is not restored, the French people will be stained by the consequences of this transgression.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

prodiguant l'or et le sang, c'est en forçant tous les moyens, que les maîtres de la France ont obtenu les succès dont nous sommes les témoins.⁵⁰

It is not only the memory of the innocent monarch whose spirit will loom over France, nor alone will the blood of so many innocent victims forever stain the nation. It is also the Jacobin specter, that vestige of Robespierre and his barbarian cohort, who loiters in the collective memory. De Maistre refers to this as *le démon révolutionnaire*, although it might alternatively be called a national trauma, inflicted by the Revolution.⁵¹

Punishment and Trauma

De Maistre views Robespierre and Louis XVI as more than symbols of revolutionary violence; they are wounds left behind in the Revolution's aftermath. Their principal function in the *Considérations* is to remain fresh in the nation's memory as immediately discernible signifiers of past horrors, what we might call a "collective trauma". The lasting images specifically of these two men evoke, in a spiritual sense, the agonizing memory of the Revolution. Here it is incumbent to briefly explain the sense of this word, *trauma*; what it implies in the broader context of my study, how traumatic events, and indeed their memory, can shape and influence literary representations of (and reflections on) the past. According to Cathy Caruth, the theme of trauma in literature can be understood as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available."⁵² Caruth's use of "wound" here is critical, for trauma, namely the effects or stresses of a severe psychological or physical injury, is closely related in this context with the French *blesure*, a term which, according to Deborah Jenson, "was

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 240.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 261.

⁵² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

ubiquitous in post-Revolutionary discourses ranging from political theory to poetry.”⁵³ *Trauma* most accurately captures for Jenson the spirit of French Romanticism, particularly when understood, as I concur and expand upon in a later chapter, as a consequence or effect of the Revolution. Trauma is a particularly salient motif in the period’s literature, although it is often not immediately clear that the Revolution is its ultimate cause, as we see, for instance in a text like Chateaubriand’s *René*, where the postrevolutionary *mal du siècle* is thinly veiled by a story set some decades prior in the American wilderness. The subtext in such works conforms to Caruth’s characterization of trauma as “the story of a wound that cries out”; although seen and heard, trauma is often vague, particularly in terms of its causes: its full context is obscured. This is precisely where the role of a writer like Joseph de Maistre—along with many of those I shall discuss—becomes ever more relevant; while the *Considérations* does not explicitly invoke trauma like the Romantics would in subsequent generations, the idea of a collective *blesure* is central to de Maistre’s providential view of the Revolution.

Also central to this idea of collective trauma is the recognition that events are indiscriminate in who they affect, that both victimization and its memory are no longer “personal” or individualized—that the effects of the Revolution are universalized, or “democratized”—so history’s great men are swept up in the very same whirlwind as their inferiors: divine justice, in other words, is indiscriminate. Rétif conceives of this shared experience in much the same way as de Maistre, however different their respective accounts of the Revolution may appear. Writing a sort of popular chronicle, the author makes little distinction between scenes of immense historical consequence and common, everyday life during the Revolution; the actions and experiences of those great men share the page with the clamor of the hoi polloi. History, according to this framework is a universalized experience, so its effects are viewed in more egalitarian terms. What is perhaps most novel

⁵³ Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 261 footnote 30.

in Rétif's approach to writing the Revolution as he observed it is that those famous and consequential actors are subject to the same historical forces as anyone else. Among those renowned figures who feature in the *Nuits*—Robespierre, Marat and Corday, Danton, Lafayette, to name just a few—none has such a striking presence (like in the *Considérations*) as that of the King. Yet Louis XVI, particularly after his condemnation, captures our attention not because he appears as a virtuous paragon of the dying monarchy, nor for that matter as some furious tyrant. It is his unremarkable character that is most shocking. Now simply a condemned man, Louis meets his end quickly and unceremoniously in Rétif's account. But the scene is not simply brief, it is also stylistically restrained. Unlike most other iterations of the execution, both contemporary and subsequent, Rétif does not transform it into a spectacle. Instead, the author's poetics is reserved for his commentary on the event, where he mythologizes the regicide:

Louis n'était pas un tyran ordinaire: il était né sur un trône. Coupable, comme roi, il l'était infiniment plus, comme particulier. Aussi fut-il condamné comme tel; et il y a cette différence entre lui et Charles I^{er}, que celui-ci est mort roi, et que Louis XVI ne l'était plus!... On n'est jamais innocent, quant on contribue à plonger sa nation dans l'anarchie et le malheur!... Il était parjure, parjure à la nation! c'est le plus grand des crimes. La nation a-t-elle pu le juger, l'exécuter? Cette question ne peut se faire par un être qui pense. La nation peut tout chez elle; elle a le pouvoir qu'aurait le genre humain, si une seule nation, par un seul gouvernement, réagissait le globe. Qui oserait alors disputer au genre humain, son pouvoir?... C'est ce pouvoir, indisputable, senti par les anciens Grecs, qu'a une nation de perdre même un innocent, qui leur fit exiler Aristide et condamner à mort Phocion. O vérité, que n'ont pas assez sentie mes contemporains, que ton oubli leur a causé de maux! Les émigrés, les prêtres se sont amusés à calculer ce qu'on pouvait leur faire justement, suivant les lois de particulier à particulier, et ils ont crié à l'injustice

contre la nation! Ils se sont révoltés contre elle! Et quand on a puni de mort ce nouveau crime, le plus grand de tous! on a crié à *la barbarie!* Concitoyens, posez les vrais principes, et ne vous en écartez plus! Ne confondez pas les temps de révolution, avec ceux du règne paisible des lois! Surtout, n'invoquez pas, comme on a fait de nos jours, contre l'oppression, la protection de lois que vous ne voulez pas reconnaître: c'est une inconséquence puérile! Vous êtes hors de la loi que vous méconnaissez; elle ne vous doit aucune protection; bien pis, elle vous prive même de l'application de celles de la nature! Voilà des principes rigoureux! Mais ils sont justes.⁵⁴

Entries on infamous dates such as this modulate fluidly between high and low, popular and elitist: it is the history of the throne and palace alongside the alleyway and gutter. These oscillations in historical perspective are ubiquitous, although they are used to greatest effect on 21 January 1793.

Despite the obvious differences in the ways Rétif and de Maistre *represent* the Regicide (and the Revolution in general), they arrive at similar conclusions in their respective constructions of memorials. The *Considérations* invokes a sense of original sin, which we might think of as prerequisite to (or a euphemism for) citizenship, though in a more spiritual sense. For Rétif, meanwhile, the Regicide is emblematic of a shared experience of Terror; it is all the more tragic as we watch Louis XVI become, in real time, another one of the work's characters, a simple Parisian—deprived of his former nobility—who faces the guillotine's egalitarian blade. The Regicide, as it is rendered in the *Nuits*, ties together each of the work's generic loose ends—diary, journal, short story—the product of which is a sort of bourgeois myth *avant la lettre*. This myth hinges upon the total annihilation of the King, the desecration of his one body, the physical destruction of his other. Rétif's laconic first-hand

⁵⁴ Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne, *Les Nuits révolutionnaires*, (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1978), p. 308-9.

account of Louis' journey to the guillotine effectively degenerates one myth so that a new, revolutionary myth can blossom:

Il partit à huit heures, dans la carrosse du maire Chambon, seul, avec son confesseur. L'avant-veille, on avait renvoyé ses conseils. Il passa par les boulevards, entre deux haies de gardes nationales, qui faisaient retirer le monde des croisées. Il allait doucement. Il arriva dans la place des Tuileries, ci-devant Louis XV, à neuf heures un quart. Il descendit de voiture. On lui lia les mains au pied de l'échafaud; les mains libres nuiraient à l'exécution par la guillotine. Il monta. Les instruments militaires bruissaient. Il s'avança pour parler au bord de l'échafaud, qui regarde le nord: les instruments s'arrêtèrent une seconde; mais l'ordre du commandant général les fit reprendre. Louis parla: le mot *pardonne* fut le seul qu'on entendit. Les exécuteurs avertis, le ramenèrent au Poteau, et en un clin d'œil, il cessa de vivre...⁵⁵

Despite his best efforts at presenting the Regicide as simply another entry among the hundreds of *nuits*, there is something unique and symbolic about the way he treats this event. Where de Maistre singles out the Regicide because it is a collective scar on the Nation, Rétif does so because it is the expression of a national will, of the people unified under the banner of a shared triumph. Rétif writes above all, it seems, for an audience, as a performative act. Communicative yet ornate, it is as though the author has composed this soliloquy to perform himself, upon some imagined stage. Or perhaps the *Nuits* is his stage, a rostrum from which to make his impassioned appeal to his fellow citizens, certainly to the future generations: “Je vis les hommes de 1992, lire notre histoire; je m’efforçai de les entendre, et je les entendis. La sévérité de leur jugement m’effraya!”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 307-8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 293.

Contemplating the Memorial

I have chosen to begin with a discussion of these two texts because they represent distinct approaches of memorializing the French Revolution. It is serendipitous that they were among the first such works to be written, but chronology, namely that they were both written during the revolutionary decade, is of less importance here than is substance. What matters, above all, is that these texts are archetypal revolutionary fictions; both give us an idea of how the French Revolution was already in the 1790s regarded with a sort of veneration that was conducive to the genesis of national mythology. The question of historical memory, i.e., “how should we memorialize the Revolution”, was already of great importance to revolutionary and counterrevolutionary alike. It is a question which was answered through word and image, as well as through action; David’s *Serment de Jeu de paume*, the revolutionary festivals and the public apotheosis of Jean-Paul Marat (and Lepelletier), much like those works of Joseph de Maistre and Rétif de la Bretonne, labor to preserve for posterity a certain representation of the Revolution. Certainly, during the Revolution—and in the decades and centuries since—this was at least as much a political concern as it was a cultural and artistic one. Take as an example Saint-Just, who in his *L’Esprit de la Révolution* (1791) reserves a chapter to the question of public monuments; why they exist, who they should (and do) memorialize; what their social function ought to be, in light of these recent events: “La piété publique doit aux grands hommes qui ne sont plus, quelle que soit leur patrie, des monuments qui les éternisent, et entretiennent dans le monde la passion des grandes choses.”⁵⁷ Who or what should be immortalized under the new regime? This question cuts to the very heart of the treatise; adeptly highlighting what he views as the great challenge of historical memory, Saint-Just laments that Europe has produced for the most part only custodians of the past who extol mediocrity, recording bare

⁵⁷ Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, *L’esprit de la Révolution et de la constitution de France*, in *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 465.

facts for some imagined posterity, while abjectly failing to properly elevate these hackneyed annals to the stature of heroic myth:

Partout où je porte les yeux je vois les statues des rois qui tiennent encore le sceptre d'airain. Je ne connais en Europe que trois monuments dignes de la majesté humaine, ceux de Pierre I^{er}, de Frédéric et de Henri; où sont les statues des Dassus, des Montaigne, des Pope, des Rousseau, des Montesquieu, des Duguesclin et de tant d'autres?⁵⁸

Saint-Just undoubtedly has the Revolution—and perhaps himself—in mind here. A heroic age such as this one presents a singular opportunity to immortalize the men and virtues which made it reality.⁵⁹ However much he detests what has happened, de Maistre contributes in no small way to this same end, perhaps unwittingly fashioning a cohesive national identity around the monument of the Revolution. He makes no distinction between Girondin and Montagnard, sans-culotte and bourgeois; there is only *le citoyen français*, and he is everywhere stigmatized with the scar of this original sin. The *Nuits révolutionnaires* affirms a similarly ubiquitous, albeit temporal and personalized, revolutionary experience. Rétif is more ambivalent than de Maistre, although he is undoubtedly no less astonished. In a manner of speaking, Rétif's observations affirm de Maistre's tropes. More important than their respective opinions of the Revolution, however, they both leave for posterity some rendition of a French revolutionary spirit.

We return here to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who was deeply invested in answering the question of what France might look like in the distant future. Having written, some decades

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See: Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Of particular importance here is Hunt's discussion of the symbolic, political importance of certain dates, events, and icons, in the second chapter, titled 'Symbolic forms of political practice', pp. 52-86.

earlier, *L'An 2440* (1771)—a visionary novel if ever there were such a thing—Mercier's thought is evidently disposed to questions of historical memory, whether it is reflective or anticipatory.⁶⁰ Whereas in *2440* he imagines, as the title suggests, France centuries in the future, his *Nouveau Paris* represents the city during the revolutionary period, while also contemplating how memory will treat the Revolution:

Si la révolution de la France est l'événement le plus grand, le plus extraordinaire, qui soit arrivé dans les empires du monde, depuis le cours des siècles, et le plus mémorable que les archives du temps et les fastes de l'histoire puissante conserver aux dernières générations, on aimera sans doute à contempler le point où elle pris naissance et où fut arboré pour la première fois ce signe de régénération, cette cocarde nationale qui doit faire le tour du monde, événement dont la prophétie se réalise chaque jour.⁶¹

In many ways Mercier's questions, which are essentially “what is the Revolution? and how might we and our progeny go about defining it, retrospectively?” are mine as well. And while we benefit from the greater scope of hindsight, my fundamental inquiry is not all that different other than in verb tense; “what *was* the Revolution? And how *was* it defined by those French writers of the period in question?”

I have attempted, in this introduction, to briefly show how responses to these inquiries can, and were addressed in different genres, according to unique structural, philosophical, and stylistic precepts, to memorialize the Revolution in some distinct

⁶⁰ Mercier's dual interests, in representing the present and imagining how the moment will be remembered, is reminiscent of Balzac's realist engagement with historical memory, which I shall discuss later in this thesis. To this end, Mercier's work (along with that of Rétif de la Bretonne), is often considered an early example of literary realism. See, for ex. Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac: une mythologie réaliste*, (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971), p. 63.

⁶¹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, in *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit*, ed. by Jean-François Leca (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), p 440-41.

manner. Distinct, yet each is bound to the others by virtue of its engagement with this particular historical event. Representations of the Revolution of course do vary, often a great deal, from one work or author to another; what is for one a source of trauma, a fresh wound which torments the afflicted, is for another an exalted symbol of national pride, or the very foundation of an historical myth. The texts I have chosen are therefore all conceived within the broad construct of “historical memory”, for past events can only be reimagined if they are first remembered. Trauma (or the less anachronistic *blesure*) is one of the lenses through which, I argue, the Revolution’s memory was understood and written. The other, as the title to my thesis suggests, is *mythistory*. More than simply the terminological amalgamation of two important methods of memorialization, this construct incorporates the culturally subjective process of mythification into rational, scholastic historical inquiry. This term is useful because it advances my contention that our understanding of the Revolution’s literary afterlife in nineteenth-century France need not be fragmented according to artistic and analytical differences between genres, instead concentrating on the point at which historical reconstruction encounters the mythological conceptual imagination. The result, according to Joseph Mali, does not confine the past within a tenuously “true” historical paradigm, but illuminates and demystifies the “practical verities in which the members of the community all believe and live, even though (or precisely because) they are mythical rather than logical or historical deductions.”⁶² It should be noted that while I do not argue per se for an explicit connection between revolutionary trauma and mythistorical recreation, I believe there to be an observable progression or evolution (albeit one which I treat as largely implicit) from the former to the latter. What begins, in the decade or so immediately following 1789, as a raw, visceral reaction to the Revolution, cedes way in the subsequent generations to a sort of broadening internalization of this experiential sentiment, as we see in the early-mid nineteenth-century works of the French Romantics, then in the mimetic

⁶² Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 4.

representation of this (often) traumatic memory, and its cultural reverberations, in Balzac's novels. The creative progression of this "mythistorical" formation reaches an apogee and is most clearly observable, as I hope shall become clear in the final chapter, in Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française*.

Regarding the substance and structure of the following chapters, this study, as previously noted, begins in the revolutionary decade and concludes c. 1850. While I generally adhere to a chronological progression toward the mid-nineteenth century, there is occasional chronological overlap between and among chapters. The first chapter examines the epistolary novel, the eminent literary mode of the *Ancien Régime*, and how this established genre was adapted and reimagined during and immediately after the Revolution, to convey the intimate sentiments and experiences of fictional correspondents, whose lives were directly affected by its events. By looking at the works of Isabelle de Charrière and Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis, along with a more sustained focus on Germaine de Staël's *Delphine* and Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan's *L'Émigré*, I show how the traumatic effects of the Revolution—specifically in relation to emigration, disillusion, and displacement—are powerfully conveyed through the distinctive form of the fictionalized epistle. Furthermore, this chapter positions the epistolary novel as a bridge between *Ancien Régime* literary norms and postrevolutionary French Romanticism, arguing that the motif of revolutionary trauma, central to later French Romantic literature, first emerges in this genre. These texts also reveal a generational rupture, as pre-1789 cultural *mœurs* clash with revolutionary ideas; this friction between worlds highlights and personalizes the wounds of the Revolution. Building upon this theme, the second chapter examines how revolutionary trauma is expressed in the work of the first generations of postrevolutionary French romantics. Chateaubriand's early writings—*René* and *Les Martyrs*, in particular—convey a profound sense of disillusion and despair, which I argue is emblematic of early French Romanticism's response to the Revolution and its broad social effects, along with its personal impact. In these texts, I focus on *le vague des passions*, a fundamental concept in Chateaubriand's writing. Closely related to

le mal du siècle, this spiritual malady reflects the traumatic effects of the French Revolution. This is evident in literary works across the first decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to Chateaubriand's writings, my study examines the early fictions of Charles Nodier before turning to later novels, including Alfred de Musset's *Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, Claire de Duras' *Ourika*, and Alfred de Vigny's *Stello*. Moreover, this chapter establishes the idea of an enduring memory of the Revolution, whether as a source of despair and disillusion—as is often the case in these works—or as an event that looms over the early decades of the nineteenth century.

The third chapter, meanwhile, examines the regicide as a character archetype that embodies many of the themes of revolutionary trauma introduced in the previous chapter. This chapter compares Pierre-Simon Ballanche's *L'Homme sans nom* and Balzac's *Un Épisode sous la Terreur*, examining how each writer portrays this trauma, particularly as a manifestation of the guilt tied to the regicide. Although these texts present seemingly different perspectives on guilt regarding Louis XVI's execution—the first through an unnamed regicide, the second through Charles-Henri Sanson, *le bourreau*—they ultimately converge upon the question of who ought to bear the burden of the king's death. This chapter also serves a transitional function, connecting early Romantic depictions of revolutionary trauma to its later, mid-century realist treatment. Thus, the fourth chapter examines Balzac's engagement with revolutionary memory, specifically through his use of what I call the "revolutionary backstory." Throughout *La Comédie humaine*, the Revolution lingers in the minds of many of Balzac's characters, shaping their views, actions, and in some instances, the material world they inhabit.

One striking example of how the *Comédie's* material world reveals a character's revolutionary backstory is in *Une ténébreuse affaire*, with Laurence de Cinq-Cygne's display of a portrait of Charlotte Corday, on the wall of the salon at her familial estate. Laurence's decision to display the portrait reveals something about her ideology, while also serving as an historical signpost used by the author—a subtle historical reference which at least some

readers of the time would have been able to identify. This portrait introduces the fifth chapter's exploration of "the myth of Charlotte Corday", tracing her memorialization over the half-century from her assassination of Jean-Paul Marat in 1793, to her apotheosis in the works of Lamartine and Michelet. This thesis then concludes, in the final chapter, by arguing that Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française* offers a coherent attempt to generate a national myth from—and occasionally in conflict with—the literary-historical memory of the Revolution that had developed over the preceding five decades. Michelet's construction of this historical myth seeks to create a heroic image of *le peuple*, rooted in the triumph of 1789, one that is both profound and accessible (*i.e.*, popular). This thesis concludes with Michelet in principle because his work most effectively demonstrates a steadfast, sustained commitment to the Revolution's memory, a commitment that is often incidental or ephemeral in many of the other works discussed. This is not to suggest that his is the final or the infallible word. Rather, I propose viewing Michelet as the distilled literary-historical spirit of the preceding fifty years, much as he likely viewed himself—not merely as a historian of France, but as the self-anointed personification of French history.

Chapter 1. The Seeds of Memory: Epistolary Fiction and the Prehistoriography of the Revolution

Les rencontres les plus extraordinaires, les plus étonnantes circonstances, les plus déplorables situations deviennent des événements communs, et surpassent ce que les auteurs de roman peuvent imaginer.

-Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan, *L'Émigré*

The Old Made New

In this chapter I shall examine the epistolary novel in France during the critical moment in its history, from the outbreak of revolution in 1789, to roughly 1804. More specifically, I am interested in how this genre was adapted and transformed in response to an unprecedented sociopolitical upheaval, and the role it played in the memorialization of the French Revolution in its immediate aftermath. Indeed, neither the letter nor its fictional counterpart was in any sense a “revolutionary” mode of writing; on the contrary, both were emblematic—and by 1789 increasingly dated literary vestiges—of *ancien régime* culture. The genre itself had attained the height of its popularity some decades earlier, amidst the vast letter-writing networks which flourished during the eighteenth century, commonly referred to, both at the time and since, as the “republic of letters”. The letter during this period served as a primary means of communication for many of the century’s thinkers, a medium through which Europe’s great minds could collaborate on various intellectual endeavors. Liberated from the strict and often oppressive sociopolitical milieu within which they existed, networks of correspondences played an important role in shaping the economy of ideas in eighteenth-century Europe. As Dena Goodman explains, “citizenry came to value reciprocal exchange based on a model of friendship that contrasted markedly with the

absolutist state, corporative society, and the family.”⁶³ An important point, which is suggested by Goodman’s description, is the idea of congeniality, which implies a degree of trust and intimacy. With intimacy of course comes the expectation of privacy, the violation of which made epistolary fiction ever more compelling and enticing for contemporary readers. To this end the epistle, even if fictional, could be experienced as a voyeuristic genre, for the thoughts it communicated were those meant not for us, nor for anyone else to read, other than the diegetic recipient. One must therefore momentarily suspend disbelief by partaking in this charade where the reader (along with the author) acts as a privileged party, whose prying eyes have, it seems by fault of chance, gained privileged access to this literary boudoir. Consequently, the letters needed to maintain an aura of authenticity; they had to betray the prospect of believability, thereby convincing us that these exchanges could have been written by those to whom they are attributed. The author must relinquish or share, at least in part, his place as progenitor of the text, an effect which gives the letters a more profound resonance. This effect is not entirely unlike the now (and perhaps always) camp film motif “based on true events”, which recurs in certain genres, still to at least a modicum of dramatic effect.

This problematic of epistolary realism—specifically among those texts written before 1789—was often remedied by use of what Gérard Genette has termed the *crypto-auctorial* or *pseudo-allographe*, wherein the true author attributes authorship of the fictional correspondence to someone else. Consider for instance the preface to Rousseau’s *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761):⁶⁴

J’ai vu les mœurs de mon temps, et j’ai publié ces lettres. . . Quoique je ne porte ici que le titre d’Éditeur, j’ai travaillé moi-même à ce livre, et je ne m’en cache pas.

⁶³ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 2.

⁶⁴ Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), p. 188.

Ai-je fait le tout, et la correspondance entière est-elle une fiction? Gens du monde, que vous importe? C'est sûrement une fiction pour vous.⁶⁵

For the reader, Rousseau's clever deferral of authorship is an obvious, albeit effective, sleight of hand; the true author of this correspondence was likely less apparent to readers of the eighteenth century. As Robert Darnton explains, *Julie* "opened up a new realm of experience, unmediated contact with emotion, as if the letters were written by real persons and they, the readers, took part in the epistolary exchanges."⁶⁶ The letters elicited this reaction, in other words, because they were *real*. According to Darnton, the letters were both "genuine" and germane to the reader of the moment:

They [the letters of Julie and Saint-Preux] have nothing to do with literature because they are true. Like music, they communicate pure emotion from one soul to another... Rousseau offered the reader access to this kind of truth, but only if he would put himself in the place of the correspondents and become in spirit a provincial, a recluse, a foreigner, and a child.⁶⁷

The *Julie* phenomenon was by no means limited to this single work (although certainly it was an exceptional case), but rather it was representative of the more general reception of epistolary fictions. Darnton thus broadens the scope of his study beyond France, referencing Samuel Richardson, whose trio of epistolary works (*Clarissa* most notably) caused a similar fervor in England (and throughout Europe) a decade or so prior, in 1748. Much of Darnton's argument rests on these texts' relatability, on the idea that the correspondents speak in a sort of harmony with the manners of their age. In other words, epistolary novels

⁶⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2018), p. 49.

⁶⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748-1789*, (London: Allen Lane, 2023), p. 94.

⁶⁷ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York: Perseus, 2009), p. 226.

are more believable because they are written, not simply for a particular readership, but in the voice of such readers. Substance alone, however, did not achieve this illusion of authenticity; it was not simply *what* was written, but *how* epistolary fictions were passed off by their true authors, which conveyed this compelling realism.

Prefaces, which often function as *crypto-auctorial* constructs in epistolary fictions, as we have already observed with the case of Rousseau's *Julie*, are an important mechanism for the promulgation of "true" authorship, which is to say, the deferral or dispersion of authorial credit by the actual author to the fictional characters. We find it too, for example, in the *Lettres Persanes* (1721), where Montesquieu fashions himself as editor, translator, and companion of the real authors: "Les Persans qui écrivent ici étaient logés avec moi; nous passions notre vie ensemble... Ils me communiquaient la plupart de leurs lettres; je les copiai."⁶⁸ In Crébillon *filis' Lettres Athéniennes* (1771), meanwhile, the "editor" claims, rather implausibly, to have in his possession the authentic letters of Alcibiades, which somehow survived two millennia, only to have fallen into the possession of the septuagenarian French novelist. This was plainly a gimmick, similar to the one employed half a century earlier by Montesquieu, as even the uninitiated reader must have discerned, to build anticipation for a subsequent work which Crébillon never published. This charade persisted in epistolary works at least until the end of the century, fading only as the genre itself went out of style.

The preface in these texts often functions as the author's final opportunity to obfuscate his own involvement, without compromising the integrity of the correspondence itself. And while we cannot say that all acts of "crypto self-authentication" in epistolary novels are identical, nor that this practice is limited to the genre (it is not), there is a discernible pattern among works written in the epistolary form, one of supreme importance to the genre itself in its peculiar historical context. According to Richardson, the "*Air* of

⁶⁸ Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Roger Caillois, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949), p. 131.

genuineness” plays a central role in validating the work’s more profound themes. The preface, because it is typically the reader’s first contact with a text, should perform a sort of balancing act where it does not allow the letters to be dismissed outright as fabricated, while not confirming beyond any doubt their authenticity:

Tho’ I want not the letters to be *thought* genuine... they should not prefatically be owned *not* to be genuine: and this for fear of weakening their Influence where any of them are aimed to be exemplary; as well as to avoid hurting that kind of Historical Faith which Fiction itself is generally read with, tho’ we know it to be Fiction.⁶⁹

This paratextual construct, according to Laurent Versini, evokes the guise of the real; it is a means of gently, even subliminally nudging the reader towards a more intense engagement with the text: “L’illusion de l’authenticité, qui désarme les préventions du lecteur à l’égard de la fiction, sera donc entretenue par une foule de procédés bien connus: le mode de transmission des lettres est toujours soigneusement expliqué dans une préface, portefeuille trouvé dans un jardin ou dans une maison louée, ou manuscrit découvert dans une armoire secrète de la maison de compagne achetée par l’éditeur.”⁷⁰ The *portefeuille* becomes an important vessel of preservation and transmission, an ark within which the epistles are preserved, as well as an act of mimesis, employed in order to give the reader a sense of proximity to the correspondents. “Discovery” is thus a seminal event in the epistolary

⁶⁹ Samuel Richardson, “Letter to William Warburton 19 April 1748”, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. by John Carroll, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), p. 85. Although Richardson’s influence on the French epistolary novel must not be understated, it is also important to note in turn the impact of Richardson’s French predecessors—notably Marivaux—on his own work. These epistolary constructs are as much part of a French tradition as they are of the broader epistolary one. For the so-called French influence on Richardson, see: Godfrey Frank Singer, *The Epistolary Novel: Its origin, development, decline, and residuary influence*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 184.

⁷⁰ Laurent Versini, *Le Roman Épistolaire*, (Paris: PUF, 1998), p. 51.

mythos, rubber-stamping its credibility and establishing around it a particular historical moment and milieu. The letter-as-artifact has functions well beyond the purview of literature, as we shall see, for example, in a later chapter with David's discovery of Charlotte Corday's note to Jean-Paul Marat, in his famous tableau of the latter's assassination.

Reader responses such as the one Darnton describes tell only one part of this story; the fabricated authenticity, of *Clarissa* or *Julie*, of the *Lettres Persanes*, and other eighteenth-century epistolary fictions, serves as an important precursor to those works which emerged leading up to and immediately following the Revolution. During this late period in the history of the genre, epistolary fictions often highlighted the tension between *Ancien Régime* social milieux and Revolutionary disruptions and destructions.⁷¹ Certainly, we see this tension play out first as a conflict of ideas, in novels like Marat's *Les Aventures du jeune comte Potowski* (1772) and Sade's *Aline et Valcour* (1795). In the latter, which Sade began writing just prior to the Revolution (c. 1786), while imprisoned in the Bastille,⁷² the first edition's *Avis de l'éditeur* professes its ideological significance: "Ce que cet ouvrage a de singulier encore, c'est d'avoir été fait à la Bastille. La manière dont, écrasé par le despotisme ministériel, notre auteur prévoyait la Révolution, est fort extraordinaire, et doit jeter sur son ouvrage une nuance d'intérêt bien vive."⁷³ Sade, in a characteristic expression of egoism, reimagines himself almost in the third person, as though he were an historian remarking on the discovery of some valuable artifact.

Once the Revolution began, however, ideological clashes became more than an intellectual exercise; as one scholar remarks, in the preface to a recent edition of *Adèle de*

⁷¹ The works mentioned thus far represent but a sliver of the vast body of epistolary fictions published prior to 1789. As Thomas Beebee has noted, from 1769-71 alone, forty-three epistolary novels were published in French. See: Thomas O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷² Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille for around six years, from 1784 until just before the beginning of the Revolution.

⁷³ Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, *Aline et Valcour*, (Paris: Classiques de Poche, 1994), p. 44.

Sénange (1792), Madame de Souza’s work reflects a visceral friction between the two epochs, “la confrontation entre la civilisation d’Ancien Régime et le monde né de la Révolution.”⁷⁴ But what was the appeal of the epistolary form, a subgenre of the novel whose popularity was clearly dwindling by the 1780s, to this generation of writers? It would be easy—and in my view insufficient—to respond to this question by invoking the monotonous persistence of some literary tradition alone, one which, however true it may be, does little to explain the genre’s importance to the development of narratives of the Revolution. One of this chapter’s goals is of course to attempt a satisfactory response to this question. Where, for instance authenticity was once contrived, as we have mentioned already, at least in part through paratextual modes which served as signposts for the reader, the epistolary fictions written during and immediately following the Revolution sustained an air of verisimilitude not merely because it was implied that they were found “dans la neige”, or “dans des portefeuilles d’émigrés”, but in order to more viscerally express a profound expression of trauma, by establishing an intimate proximity to a sociopolitical upheaval which, more often than not, their authors endured in some manner; an experience they shared with all too many of their readers. Epistolary fictions, but specifically the émigré subgenre that we shall discuss first, thus became at once representations of a deeply personal experience, not quite pseudo-memoirs but certainly drawn from the very same bank of memories, and a means of projecting a civilizational trauma in the most realistic, personal medium; the one through which it was often communicated, the letter.

A Revolution in Letters

In some instances, epistolary realism is implied even before the actual writing commences; in lieu of the sort of preface discussed in the introduction, Isabelle de

⁷⁴ Madame de Souza, *Adèle de Sénange*, (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2018), p. 29.

Charrière, for example, implies the possible authenticity of her letters by including in the title the location where they were discovered—and therefore indicating that they were indeed found, rather than invented. This we see in her *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*, and the corresponding *Lettre d'un Français et réponse d'un Suisse*—also known by the title *Lettres trouvées dans la neige*—the latter itself a sort of preface to the former, with the long-form subtitle, which doubles as the work's abstract:

Ces lettres ont été trouvées dans la neige, à quelque distance du Locle, le dernier jour de la foire de Neuchâtel. C'est l'original de la première, qui avait été perdu avec la copie de la seconde. L'éditeur de ces lettres, ne voulant risquer de nuire à personne, a substitué des étoiles au nom d'un homme inconnu et à celui d'une ville très connue.⁷⁵

As the title suggests, the short text is a suite of correspondences between the two unnamed countrymen, during the first months of 1793. The first letter, which is dated January 31, just ten days after Louis XVI's execution, is thematically linked to the day it was penned; the Frenchman's letter, for example, expresses a profound sense of despair, for what is becoming of the Revolution, and for the terror which awaits: "L'an cinquième de la Liberté, la presse chez nous est libre; mais l'écriture à la main ne l'est pas, ni la parole, ni la pensée. On craint tout, on a tout à craindre, l'espionnage, la délation, l'accusation, l'arrestation, l'incarcération, et ce qui s'ensuit."⁷⁶ This opening salvo indicates that even in the intimacy of a private correspondence, one is not necessarily safe from the burgeoning hegemon's prying eyes, a play on the generic voyeurism mentioned earlier. This appears to negate or invert the very spirit of the republic of letters, implying that private correspondence is no longer a

⁷⁵ Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettre d'un Français et réponse d'un Suisse*, in *Une aristocrate révolutionnaire, Écrits 1788-1794*, ed. by Isabelle Vissière, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1988), p. 199.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

free economy of ideas, but is subject to the very same oppressive forces it once sought to evade. We are immediately struck by this reversal, that such freedoms now ostensibly exist in the public sphere, but not in the privacy of the letter; whether written or spoken, individuals must be mindful of what they say. The Frenchman's lament is clearly one not unlike a lover scorned or abused, betrayed even:

J'ai été patriote *très prononcé*, comme on l'a dit; j'avais vu sous l'Ancien Régime tant de vexations, d'abus, d'horreurs! Aujourd'hui, je ne suis qu'un homme qui se tait et se cache, mais qui ne laisse pas d'éprouver quelque impatience, quelque ennui, et un grand désir de se remettre en liberté. Pour cela, il faut sortir de France.⁷⁷

This is the sort of sentiment that is an essential element first of epistolary fiction, in the tradition of Rousseau, then of the *émigré* novel. As Katherine Astbury explains, the *émigré* novel is itself a sub-genre of the sentimental novel, descended from Rousseau's *Julie*, yet also from *le roman-mémoire*, notably of Marivaux, Crébillon, and the like.⁷⁸ Furthermore, it might be said that this is a peculiarly feminine sort of literary output, emblematic of the eighteenth-century novel; this in spite of the fact that in many cases such works were written by men. For Béatrice Didier, Charrière's literary sensibility—what Didier calls “le style de l'affectivité”—is that of a uniquely “seasoned”, even jaded woman.⁷⁹ Her characters do not wallow in reveries of an idealized becoming; rather, they lament their own—often profane—realities. Charrière observes and describes individuals as they react and adapt to their peculiar circumstances; she is intrigued by the human ecosystem, where these individuals are given discursive autonomy. Charrière's voice is never explicitly heard, though it is latent in the correspondence; we can therefore sense her ideas, but rarely does

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Katherine Astbury, *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 132-58.

⁷⁹ Béatrice Didier, *L'Écriture femme*, (Paris: PUF, 1991), p. 107-8.

one feel her presence.⁸⁰ Writing in reference to the *Lettres Neuchâtelaises* (but the concept applies to her broader œuvre), Charrière explains, “Ne peignant personne, on peint tout le monde. Cela doit être et je n’y avais pas pensé. Quand on peint de fantaisie, mais avec vérité, un troupeau de moutons, chaque mouton y trouve son portrait, ou du moins le portrait de son voisin.”⁸¹ *Peindre tout le monde* is a statement which reveals the author’s debt to Rétif de la Bretonne and anticipates Balzac’s later work; Charrière is thus attentive to the *mœurs* of her age, especially the manner by which they undergo profound transformation after the Revolution. Consider the following passage, from the fifth of the *Lettres trouvées dans la neige*,

Avant la Révolution chaque cercle avait ses Apollons, ses Vénus, ses Minerves.
Aujourd’hui, chaque section a ses Brutus, ses Solons, ses Démosthènes. Le moindre petit dénonciateur est un Cicéron qui sauve la République, et plus de cent Catilinas ont été expulsés. Quant au beau sexe, on en parle peu, depuis que les dames de la Halle ont accaparé presque exclusivement la célébrité féminine.⁸²

If such observations as those made above, by the Frenchman, strike us as somewhat raw or uncritical, it is likely because Charrière wrote the letters near-contemporaneously to their fictional dates. More than simply a *roman-à-clef*, however, the author infuses her text with an historical realism which allows the Revolution to unfold almost in real time, through the perspective of these correspondents.

⁸⁰ Bahktin’s conception of the genre is useful here: “The epistolary form is a variety of *Ich-Erzählung*. Discourse here is double-voiced, and in most cases unidirectional. As such it functions as a compositional surrogate of the author’s discourse, which is absent.” Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019) p. 204-5.

⁸¹ Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettres Neuchâtelaises*, (Paris: La Différence, 1991), p. 16.

⁸² Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettre d’un Français et réponse d’un Suisse*, in *Une aristocrate révolutionnaire, Écrits 1788-1794*, ed. by Isabelle Vissière, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1988), p. 220.

The Revolution is thus an optimal historical setting for Charrière to see her fictional epistles to their highest form. Whereas in her prerevolutionary works, the *Lettres Neuchâtelaises*, for example, time and place are less thematically significant, the Revolution brings with it, we might say, a commencement of history. And while the reader of her earlier works can discern milieu and moment in the broadest sense (that this novel was written in the eighteenth century), it is not necessary to know the precise dates; this is perhaps why, in the *Lettres Neuchâtelaises* we know only that the letters were written sometime in the 1780s. A letter may be dated—if such information is given at all—as follows: “A Neuchâtel, ce 20 janvier 178...” In stark contrast, Charrière’s Revolutionary works are invariably bound to a precise date of composition, and even in the rare case where no date is given, this is because such information can often be inferred by references made to specific events. Again, we turn to the first *Lettre d’un Français*, to the Frenchman’s postscript:

Ne craignez pas que je porte la mélancolie dans votre riant et florissant séjour. J’ai sauvé ma gaieté du naufrage; et quelles que soient les tristes nouvelles qui nous viennent du centre des événements, j’ai un plus grand besoin encore de rire que de gémir en liberté. Qu’un homme innocent, ou du moins très excusable, soit mort comme un malfaiteur, et cela sans qu’aucune loi antérieure ait pu motiver la sentence prononcée, cela est révoltant sans doute; mais sa vie était si triste! Et lui-même n’a pas paru trouver cette mort plus affreuse qu’une autre.⁸³

Even without the letter’s date of January 31 present in the text, it would not have been all too difficult to conclude that the “homme innocent” to which the Frenchman refers is Louis XVI. The diegetic time stamp, however, leaves no space for ambiguity. The above passage also highlights the confluence of private and public spheres; an historical event—in this case

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

the execution of Louis XVI—plays out as a grand public spectacle, yet it also disturbs the emotional conditions of those who bear witness. Here the king’s execution governs the correspondent’s emotional state, which he reveals in confidence, “j’ai sauvé ma gaieté du naufrage...” Thus, the correspondence personalizes the world-historical, speaking not only to a fictional recipient, but because this recipient is Swiss, to those beyond France’s borders. The text appeals, as a sort of journalistic endeavor in this regard, to those living elsewhere on the continent. This, as shall become clear throughout this chapter, is one of the great virtues of the epistolary novel as a means of revolutionary representation; at a time when each day could bring with it some transformational political event, or profound cultural shift, the personal, the sentimental, even quotidian revelations we often find in the genre intermingle with, indeed are influenced and shaped by the broader historical context.

If the *Lettres trouvées dans la neige* introduces the themes of revolution and emigration into Charrière’s epistolary canon, it is surely in the *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d’émigrés* where these subjects coalesce into a coherent work of historical fiction. The letters center around the effect and experience of the Revolution on a group of royalists, all of whom are either émigrés, or are fighting in the Vendée, along with one Jacobin. The work explores their reactions to political developments, the impact of these events on the other aspects of their lives, and importantly, the often-traumatic collision of the personal with the political-historical. As one scholar explains, for Charrière “L’Histoire comprend le simple citoyen aussi bien que les gouvernants. Ainsi, si elle donne des précisions historiques dans ses feuilles... c’est surtout pour montrer l’effet de ces événements sur l’individu.”⁸⁴ The *Lettres trouvées* begins, consequently, with an emotionally charged confession written by one of the royalist émigrés, Germaine, to her lover Alphonse: “Je n’y tiens plus, mon cher Alphonse; l’ennui, le chagrin, l’indignation triomphent de mon obéissance.”⁸⁵ What is the source of

⁸⁴ Medha Nirody Karmarkar, *Madame de Charrière et la révolution des idées*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 26.

⁸⁵ Charrière, *Lettre d’un Français et réponse d’un Suisse*, p. 370.

Germaine's distress? Ostensibly, it is a predicament wherein she is forced to choose between her father and lover. The "heavy father theme" as C.P. Courtney calls it, shares striking parallels to Charrière's own experience, decades earlier, with a longtime correspondent (and possible love interest), Constant d'Hermenches.⁸⁶ The novel's private dilemma, as quickly becomes evident, was however caused, in no small part, by the Revolution. As Germaine explains,

Vous demeurez à... et n'êtes point à l'armée de Condé et ne cherchez pas à vous mettre dans le corps de M. de la Châtre; vous n'êtes pas non plus à la Vendée; vous n'avez pas été à Maestricht, lors du siège: voilà ce dont mon père vous blâme, et moi qui vous en louerais bien plutôt, je ne veux plus imiter sa conduite, ne partageant pas ses sentiments: je ne veux pas me laisser oublier de vous; je ne veux pas rester plus longtemps privée de vos lettres.⁸⁷

We are immediately made aware of the divides which exist not only between revolutionaries and royalists, but those which cause discord among the émigrés as well; the fathers of both Alphonse and Germaine are sympathetic to the cause of counter-revolution, yet while the Marquis fights for the army of the Prince de Condé, Alphonse wallows away in Switzerland—in Neuchâtel, presumably—writing letters and, importantly, avoiding his service to the royalist cause.⁸⁸

It is almost ironic, then, when the apparent hostility between Alphonse and the Marquis is contrasted with the warm, fraternal relationship between Alphonse and the Jacobin

⁸⁶ C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Biography*, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1993), p. 598-9.

⁸⁷ Isabelle de Charrière, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles d'émigrés*, in *Une aristocrate révolutionnaire, Écrits 1788-1794*, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1988), p. 371.

⁸⁸ Important to note that Neuchâtel, like much of francophone Switzerland, became an important refuge for French émigrés during the Revolution.

Laurent Fonbrune. The friendship between political opposites is obviously unaffected by their differences, as we learn from the opening lines of the second letter, written by Laurent. Where, by contrast, the first letter had established the terms of conflict between the two lovers, as one rooted in politics (albeit complicated further by a patriarchal hierarchy), the second challenges the very notion of factional essentialism: “L’endroit d’où je t’écris est exactement celui d’où tu m’écrivais, quand il n’y avait encore ni émigrés ni Jacobins. Tu t’es mis au nombre des uns, moi je me suis joint aux autres; cependant nous sommes encore amis. Oui, *soyons amis, Cinna, c’est moi qui t’en conjure.*”⁸⁹ Is Charrière’s message here that even the deepest of sectarian divides are reconcilable? Perhaps, although this olive branch between friends is immediately qualified: “je t’aimais, toi, mais tu es le seul de ton arrogante caste que j’aie jamais pu souffrir.”⁹⁰ It is because of this friendship—and the intimate nature of the epistolary genre conveys it well—that Laurent can express himself so candidly, so honestly as he does. The function of epistolarity, in this regard also gives the author a platform from which she can earnestly challenge the Revolution. This Charrière does most effectively, again, through the Jacobin Laurent, who offers to his friend Alphonse an impassioned critique of the counter-revolution:

“*Que puis-je? Et que veux-je? Renverse ces questions, si tu l’aimes mieux, aristocrate fougueux et rempli de projets de vengeance. Satisfais-toi avant tout en t’énumérant à toi-même tes cruels désirs. Tu veux nous battre, nous humilier, nous écraser, nous exterminer; mais le peux-tu? Que veux-tu encore? Redevenir plus que jamais riche et puissant! Le peux-tu? Considère et tes moyens et les nôtres: apprécie bien la bonne volonté de ceux qui prétendent te secourir; apprécie aussi leurs forces; et si tu n’es pas tout à fait fou, tu finiras par vouloir te réconcilier avec tes compatriotes à des conditions qui, pour n’être pas satisfaisantes, n’en doivent pas*

⁸⁹ Charrière, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles*, p. 373.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

moins être acceptées et même proposées, parce que ce seront les meilleures que tu puisses obtenir.”⁹¹

Que puis-je? Et que veux-je? The aspiring pragmatist Laurent asks, as the author’s own voice echoes from behind the thin veneer of her novel’s most enigmatic character. Charrière, who was supportive of the principles which undergirded the Revolution—despite her noble background—was certainly no zealous partisan either. Therefore, her representation of Laurent (and Alphonse, for that matter) reflects in some sense an idealistic view, wherein such political disagreements do not demand with them rivers of blood. This is clear, for instance, in Laurent’s puckish allusion to the executed monarch’s severed head: “Je voudrais qu’une certaine tête pût être promenée sur l’entière surface du globe... Une tête! Ah! Ne frémis pas, cher Alphonse, ne pense pas que j’aie aucune pensée cruelle, ne me crois pas devenu un monstre sanguinaire.”⁹² Laurent’s insouciant attempt at humor should not be interpreted as a glib affront to the political sensibilities of his royalist friend, but (at least according to Laurent, or Charrière) as an exemplar of how personal bonds can endure exogenous political turmoil. This does not preclude disagreement, however; Laurent is an equal opportunity offender, challenging the views of Alphonse as earnestly as he does his own:

Le règne du peuple tel qu’ils l’entendent, un règne sans frein des sans-culottes et leur crédit sur ce peuple désordonné, combien de mois pourrait-il durer? Le règne d’un Orléans ou d’un Robertspierre [sic], combien de jours durerait-il? Quand ils auraient comparé de sang-froid (la tête de Méduse en donnerait aux plus enragés), quand ils auraient bien comparé ce qu’ils veulent et ce qu’ils peuvent, beaucoup d’entre eux se trouveraient heureux de rentrer dans leur première obscurité, et là

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 388.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 387.

de jouir de l'indulgence ou de l'oubli de leurs concitoyens, en conservant ce qu'ils ont acquis, sans qu'on s'informe comment ils l'ont acquis. Mais les honnêtes gens, les honnêtes Jacobins, que veulent-ils? La république, et l'ordre dans la république. Peuvent-ils, doivent-ils espérer d'obtenir ce qu'ils ont voulu et voudront constamment?⁹³

But is it Charrière's intention in the *Lettres trouvées* to offer a path toward reconciliation for these opposing sides? Is this, the sort of introspective, honest political reflection as we see in the above excerpt, some sort of naïve idealism, uncharacteristic, otherwise, of such a conscientious, practiced thinker as she? Or is it perhaps that Charrière is blind from inexperience in this regard, having not been herself an émigré? As we discussed at the outset of this chapter, the epistolary novel was particularly effective as a means of generating a sort of atmospheric realism, both structurally and in terms of its substance. Much like her predecessors in the epistolary genre, Charrière too invokes the importance of replicating the predominant *mœurs* of her time. As she explains, in a letter which Sainte-Beuve includes in his portrait of the author, "En peignant des lieux et des mœurs que l'on connaît bien, l'on donne à des personnages fictifs une réalité précieuse."⁹⁴ The subtext here is that it is not necessary that Charrière be herself an émigré in order to accurately represent such an experience, only that as an artist, her representations of such experiences possess an aura of familiarity. Thus, the sentimental peculiarities which she relates in her text are almost certainly a reflection of her nuanced understanding of revolutionary politics as a continental phenomenon, her delicate artist's touch where matters of the heart are concerned and, importantly, the point at which the two collide.

In the *Lettres trouvées* the two primary threads of correspondence—Laurent and Alphonse, and Germaine and Alphonse—are woven into the revolutionary backdrop, a

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 389.

⁹⁴ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits de femmes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 499.

setting whose immediacy we are reminded of by Germaine's father and to some extent by Laurent, who serve on opposing sides of the civil war. While the correspondence between Germaine and Alphonse is primarily that of lovers, prevented by distance—which is to say, by the Revolution—from realizing their feelings, Laurent and the Marquis signify a foil to the corresponding *roman intime*; they reflect the march of history in less opaque terms. Yet even in the case of these two partisan crusaders, Charrière aims to show that individuals invariably fail whatever tests of purity they may be subjected to (and that this is good). Laurent for instance, who has established his political views early in the novel, later shows himself a more heterodox Jacobin, sharply critical of the radical social discord, for which he blames the Revolution:

Tout à l'heure les pères n'auront plus rien de commun avec les enfants. Le divorce non seulement sépare deux époux, mais il rend chacun d'eux plus tiède pour les enfants qui leur sont communs, et l'abolition de tous les partages inégaux entre les enfants, les rend si indépendants de leurs père et mère que le respect se perd avec l'obéissance.⁹⁵

Laurent's willingness to reject an uncompromising radicalism is at once a necessary byproduct of the genre and a reflection of Charrière's stalwart faith in the principle of toleration. As regards the former, the epistolary novel lends itself so well to the chorus of voices, to the polyphonic melody of diverse ideas; the dramatic construction is not unlike a work for the stage, wherein each letter represents something like a character's lines in a play, where breaks in dialogue are protracted further only by space and time.

Epistolary fiction differs from a play, however, in terms of its intended mode of engagement with the reader. There is of course the author's audience, who is perhaps in on

⁹⁵ Charrière, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles*, p. 426.

the ruse of authenticity, if we recall Samuel Richardson's formula; but one must also consider the diegetic reader, the recipient of the letter. Laurent is therefore free to confide in his friend those complexities of his ideology, for however much he might have feared the prying eyes of some agent, the letter is still ultimately a private engagement. The specter of a correspondence being intercepted—the risk that one's private beliefs may become evidence of treason or conspiracy—only emphasizes the work's realism, as well as its intimacy, here between friends. Not only do they chance alienating the other, but they also risk imprisonment, or even death, should the letters fall into, or indeed be handed over to, the authorities. This is a gamble which, elsewhere in the genre, characters are unwilling to make. In Madame de Genlis' *Les Petits Émigrés* (1798), certain political topics are simply too dangerous for some correspondents to put into writing. We see this, for instance, in an exchange between the Chevalier d'Ermont and his friend Édouard. The Chevalier, in the novel's fourth letter, confesses to Édouard his staunch support for the counter-revolution, along with his 'raisonnemens' for believing that a restoration of the monarchy is imminent. D'Ermont only expresses such views anonymously and thus leaves the letter unsigned, "parce que je crois que cela est plus prudan [sic]."⁹⁶ Édouard's response is equally prudent: "Je ne répondrai rien à vos *raisonnemens*, mon ami, parce que je n'entends rien à la politique. Je n'ai point d'opinions sur les affaires publiques, et je vous demande en grâce de ne m'en plus parler."⁹⁷

For the reader of either Charrière or Genlis, it is almost as though we happen upon something forbidden or deeply private; that we are witness to a crime of thought, or the betrayal of a sacred covenant of privacy. This, again, lends to the work's atmosphere a heightened sense of the real. Any ideas expressed subsequently bear a sign of danger and we thus cannot help but experience them with more nuance, suspending for a moment our

⁹⁶ Madame de Genlis, *Les Petits émigrés ou correspondance de quelques enfans*, (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821), p. 15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 16.

disbelief, teetering in Richardson's limbo. At times this fear does inhibit earnest communication, as we observe elsewhere in the genre; presumably in such instances art does in fact imitate life. Charrière certainly models the *Lettres trouvées* after her own correspondences, and why would she not do so? The genre in this case simply inserts fictional characters into a real, extant network—one with which Charrière was closely familiar—and allows them to react to the spectacle of Revolution as perhaps she might have, to write about it as those around her did. In her critical summation of the work, Isabelle Vissière echoes this point, explaining that the *Lettres trouvées*, more so than any other text written by Charrière during the Revolution, reflects if not her own experience, then at the very least her own letter-writing:

Ce roman cosmopolite qui évoque à la fois la France révolutionnaire et contre-révolutionnaire, l'Allemagne et l'Angleterre, pays d'accueil, est à l'image même de la correspondance de Belle. Jamais la frontière entre la littérature et la vie n'aura été aussi incertaine... Roman ou journalisme? L'ambiguïté, au fil des événements, ne cesse de s'accroître.⁹⁸

Katherine Astbury, meanwhile, argues that novels such as Charrière's serve as "useful indicator[s] of the circulation of ideas and people at a time when writers were reassessing notions of verisimilitude, given that the daily events of the Revolution were often stranger than fiction."⁹⁹ As both Astbury and Vissière suggest, Charrière expands upon her circumstances during the Revolution, using her experiences as a template for the *Lettres trouvées*. The work reports on the conditions and thoughts of émigrés as the Revolution transpires around them, while reconstructing the network of communication which allowed émigré and non-émigré alike to transmit ideas and report on events during these, the

⁹⁸ Charrière, *Lettres trouvées dans des portefeuilles*, p. 366.

⁹⁹ Astbury, *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*, p. 132.

Revolution's most tumultuous years. Her perspective as a non-émigré who writes extensively on the experiences of émigrés offers a view which appears sometimes distorted by the apparent rose-tinted lenses through which she seems to understand this moment in history. Despite her occasional idealism, rarely, if ever, does Charrière descend into platitudes. The Revolution remains personal, quotidian, certainly believable.

An epistolary fiction like the *Lettres trouvées* is valuable as much for its qualities as an historical artifact as it is for its many literary merits. Such a work relates to the reader not merely a narrative of emigration, but the emotional conditions of émigrés expressed in their own words, through their own letters. Additionally, we often find in a novel like this a more nuanced, meta-historical narrative of the Revolution itself, what I would call the diegetic history of the Revolution, written by characters in these texts who witness, experience, and process it. As we have discussed already as concerns Charrière's works, this sort of epistolary fiction attempts to recreate the émigré experience primarily as a self-reflective exercise, reimagining the economy of letters as a pseudo-hermetic world contrived first from networks of individuals, their ideas in context of—and often in contrast to—those held by their correspondents, then from the events and circumstances which inform them.

Yet for Charrière emigration was not a personal trauma, although it was undoubtedly an important source of literary inspiration, one to which she devoted a great deal of time after 1789. This is perhaps why she is interested in creating an ecosystem of ideas, rather than one focused primarily on historical-material conditions. It is therefore correct to divide émigré fictions into two primary camps, as Astbury does: there are first those written in 1793-4, mostly by individuals like Isabelle de Charrière, who witness emigration but do not experience it first-hand; emigration in these works is to a greater extent an instrument with which to discuss the Revolution writ large. In contrast, there are those works written primarily in the latter half of the "Revolutionary decade", by émigrés themselves: Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan's *L'Émigré* (1796), along with Genlis' *Les Petits émigrés* (1798) are among

the most important thereof. In the latter works, Astbury argues, “the emphasis is placed less on the flight from France and more on the day-to-day realities of life in emigration.”¹⁰⁰ This is not to say that Charrière completely avoids dealing with the lived experiences of émigrés (in fact, the opposite is true), but that emigration is for her a means of discussing the Revolution. As Vissière astutely points out, “Si l’émigration a eu sur elle un impact considérable, c’est dans son œuvre beaucoup plus que dans sa vie que l’on peut en mesurer les effets. En moins d’un an vont naître sous sa plume un roman, trois comédies, puisés aux sources mêmes de la réalité quotidienne.”¹⁰¹ These literary works are an addition to the innumerable treatises and letters which Charrière wrote about the Revolution, though her more analytical writings are generally regarded as inferior to her literary œuvre. According to C.P. Courtney, “She is at her weakest when writing as a political pamphleteer and at her best when, as the author of novels, moral tales and plays, she rises above particular events in order to deal with some of the human and philosophical problems of the revolutionary period.”¹⁰² While Courtney is right to point out that Charrière’s fictions are superior to her other writings, it is incorrect in my view to suggest that her treatment of specific events is somehow of an inferior quality, or that they are treated with secondary importance to broader issues of the human condition. Rather, she elevates the epistolary genre by allowing her characters to perpend candidly upon the events they witness; in a sense, her most compelling political discourse can be found within her fictions.

The exchange of ideas in *Lettres trouvées* is visceral, for these thoughts are often formed in accord with the events of 1793, as ends in themselves. To this point, even in Charrière’s final novel *Trois femmes*—a work which does conform more closely to

¹⁰⁰ Katherine Astbury, ‘The trans-national dimensions of the émigré novel during the French Revolution’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23 (2011), p. 803.

¹⁰¹ Isabelle de Charrière, *Une aristocrate révolutionnaire, Écrits 1788-1794*, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1988), p. 246.

¹⁰² C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Biography*, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1993), p. 615.

Courtney's assessment of the author's strengths—the Revolution is treated less as an imminent danger, more as an historical event with profound social implications for France's national identity. While only the second part of *Trois femmes* is written in the epistolary form, it is in this exchange, between the novel's narrator, the Abbé de la Tour, and the young *émigrée* Constance, one of the three titular *femmes* (all of whom are *émigrées*), where the Revolution is scrutinized as an historical (rather than a current) event. In one of the more illuminating parts of this correspondence, the two discuss the Pantheonization of revolutionary figures and those *philosophes* who preceded them. What will—or ought to—become of their legacies? Indeed, should they have legacies at all? Consider the following, where the Abbé articulates indifference for this sort of deification:

Vous prévoyez avec plaisir, dites-vous, que Marat sera bientôt chassé du Panthéon français. Pour moi, j'avoue que cela m'est assez égal, et me serait égal quand même je m'intéresserais beaucoup aux autres choses qu'on fait et défait dans ce pays-là. Pourquoi un Panthéon? Pourquoi des Apothéoses? Voltaire et Rousseau, à votre avis, ressemblent-ils à des dieux? Je comprendrais peut-être qu'un homme qui ne serait connu que par quelque action éclatante, un conquérant tel que Bacchus, apportant à ses sujets le cep et la vigne, parmi ses trophées; un Hercule, délivrant son pays de tyrans et autres monstres; je comprendrais, dis-je, comment la reconnaissance et l'admiration pourraient les déifier; leur vie privée, leurs actions journalières, leurs grandes prétentions, leurs petites querelles, ne viendraient pas, bien connues, bien appréciées, dénoncer l'homme et détruire le dieu.¹⁰³

And Constance's response:

¹⁰³ Isabelle de Charrière, *Trois femmes*, (Gollion: Infolio, 2017), p. 132-3.

Une autre question intéressante à laquelle vous penserez, et à laquelle j'avoue n'avoir pas pensé d'abord, c'est le bien ou le mal que peuvent faire à un peuple l'hommage qu'on les accoutumerait à rendre à certains hommes. Mais ici la question ne m'effraie point; je me prononce hautement contre de pareils hommages. Les Saints du Calendrier ne font plus ni bien ni mal, et je voudrais qu'on les laissât en repos; mais il me semble qu'on devrait se faire scrupule de préparer à l'esprit humain une éternité d'enfance: certainement ceux qui vont renouvelant sans-cesse ses poupées, ne veulent pas qu'il ne sorte jamais de tutelle. Le Clergé philosophe est aussi Clergé qu'un autre, et ce n'était pas la peine de chasser le Curé de St. Sulpice pour sacrer les Prêtres du Panthéon.¹⁰⁴

Beyond its thematic relevance regarding the Revolution's posterity, this exchange highlights the letter's great utility in recreating an open, earnest, and fluid exchange of ideas. Stylistically it anticipates the true Bahktian polyphony of Dostoevsky, with the voices and ideas of the abbé and Constance personified in their respective characters. The letter also creates just enough physical distance—a drawn out pause, before responding—to heighten the dramatic tension implicit in contentious discourse, while simultaneously nurturing a profound dialogic intimacy. And it is this very intimacy which makes the letter such an effective medium for transmission of thoughts which (specifically, although not exclusively) pertain to the political and historical Revolution. In fact, we can observe as the Revolution becomes historical during the correspondence, where it passes through the realm of the immediate and experiential, into that of reflection.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 137-8.

The Émigré as Chronicler

The passage from experience to reflection does not *necessarily* transform the nature or structure of a correspondence, although especially in those texts written in the latter half of the revolutionary decade a certain thematic friction arises between the ‘pure’ exchange of letters, which deals primarily with the correspondents’ present conditions, and that reflective, ‘historical’ treatment of those experiences and their broader implications. Put another way, these later works are less “journalistic”, more “romantic” in the sense that they recede ever deeper into the correspondents’ own cognitive domain. In Charrière’s epistolary work, as we have seen, the “idea” of an ‘historical’ Revolution is typically discussed within a framework of the present, i.e. “how might we, as participants and witnesses, think about this event and its consequences?” “How does it affect us at this moment?” It is this principle, namely that the Revolution is first a personal experience, which ultimately dictates the terms of historical memory where it is broached. The discussion of revolutionary monuments in *Trois femmes*, of how the Revolution might be remembered, is a subject which is considered only in hypothetical terms. Those novels of the latter 1790s approach the Revolution with far more permanence; it is no longer a question of whether the Revolution should be memorialized in some way, but rather *how* it will be done.

In these later fictions, the idea of an ‘historical Revolution’ begins to develop within the letters, which corresponds to, and compliments, the primary theme of emigration. And while it is still premature to assert that the Revolution is treated as finished and is therefore a matter reserved for historical discussion, it can be (and typically is) conceived of in more concrete terms, separate to a greater degree from the spontaneity of daily occurrences often expressed in the correspondences. There is perhaps no example of the genre where this is achieved to greater effect than in Sénac de Meilhan’s *L’Émigré*, a novel which so brilliantly illuminates the collision of epochs, the confrontation of *Ancien Régime* custom with the

revolutionary transformation, capturing the *mœurs* of its time in its portrayal of the quotidian, while offering serious, organic discourse on the Revolution's historical gravity which never feels contrived or out of place in a collection of fictional letters written during the very height of revolutionary turmoil, in 1793. It is a novel which, as Pierre Escoube explains in his biography of the author, does, or is, many things at once: "Il y a au moins trois romans fondus en un seul: un roman de mœurs, un roman d'amour (ou pour mieux dire, de psychologie amoureuse), un roman d'histoire enfin, ce que l'on pourrait peut-être appeler un roman-témoignage."¹⁰⁵ It is true that in *L'Émigré* one finds a sampling of these different themes, each woven together into a remarkable compendium of its age; according to Albert Thibaudet, it is the ne plus ultra of the revolutionary novel, "Le seul roman important publié entre *Paul et Virginie* de 1787 et *Valérie* de 1803..."¹⁰⁶ Superlatives notwithstanding, Sénac's work is above all a brilliant fictionalization of the *émigré* experience, a novel which presents the material, psychological, and philosophical condition of the *émigré*. The most interesting and unique component of the work is, in my view, its representation of the Revolution as a conceptual, intellectualized subject. One which is, furthermore, pivotal to understanding the *émigré* psyche. Escoube and others only allude to this element; I hope to further elaborate henceforth.

At the center of *L'Émigré* is the Marquis de Saint Alban, a young aristocrat who, after being wounded at the Siege of Mainz in summer, 1793, is taken in by a German noble, the Commander Loewenstein. While under the care of his Rhenish host, Saint Alban falls in love with Loewenstein's married niece, thus introducing the formulaic impossible romance, typical of the epistolary genre. All the novel's action and conflict—political, familial, romantic—occurs, of course, within the *émigré* milieu. Thus, when Escoube, Thibaudet, and others discuss the work as *un roman de mœurs*, it is in reference to those of the *émigré*

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Escoube, *Sénac de Meilhan: de la France de Louis XV à l'Europe des émigrés*, (Paris: Perrin, 1984), p. 282.

¹⁰⁶ Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2022), p. 43.

community—fleeting vestiges of the *Ancien Régime* that they often are—as they encounter and adapt to (or resist) the customs of their new and ever-tedious circumstances. These facets of *L'Émigré* have been discussed often in scholarship on the text, but typically at the expense of the work's more interesting and unique element, as a novel of ideas. This important motif, which occupies a substantial portion of the letters, relates an exchange of ideas concerning the Revolution; it can be said that Sénac puts the novel to good use in this respect, elaborating on the related concepts introduced in one of his earlier texts, *Des Principes et des causes de la Révolution en France*, which he published soon after emigrating in 1790. As Sénac explains, *Des Principes* is an attempt to identify the Revolution's causes, and generally to explain those events and circumstances which made 1789 almost inevitable:

J'ai tâché de développer les principes et les causes qui ont amené un nouvel ordre de choses, et changé entièrement la face d'un grand Empire. Dans un temps où la manie d'écrire est Générale, où le talent d'écrire passablement est si commun, on peut être assuré qu'une foule d'Écrivains s'empressera de raconter les événements: mais les faits laissent peu de traces dans l'esprit, et souvent n'offrent rien d'instructif, et qui puisse guider dans l'avenir.¹⁰⁷

The conceptual focus of *Des Principes*, to present the true causes of the Revolution, is of course paramount for the author. But he is no less concerned with the way such ideas are expressed, stressing the importance of both elegant style and substantive truth. At the same time, Sénac understands the necessity of a certain poetics of the Revolution, that it is insufficient for writers to simply record the “bare facts.” In important ways, *Des Principes* sets the terms for a project which he would fully realize years later in *L'Émigré*, where the

¹⁰⁷ Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan, *Des Principes et des Causes de la Révolution en France*, (London, 1790), p. IV.

author's own experiences as an émigré and his analysis of the Revolution crystalize around a grand literary vision.¹⁰⁸

L'Émigré maintains and broadens the critical discursive elements of *Des Principes*, by using the novel's characters as vessels through which such views are sympathetically relayed to the reader. First, Sénac effectively utilizes the émigré ordeal itself as a means of recreating a revolutionary experience which was still fresh in the memories of the many French citizens forced to live abroad—an ongoing reality for them—as well as millions more in France, at the time of the novel's publication. The basic plot of the novel most effectively amplifies the historical subtext which appeals to a sort of shared or “national” trauma. Emigration is, however, a deeply personal experience, for both the author and his characters; the same may of course be said of the Revolution generally, certainly for those who lived through it. Yet once the solemn, historical context is organically integrated into the correspondence, this revolutionary trauma becomes more universal in tone, speaking at once to a somewhat unique French experience, and to the human condition. Take for instance the following, from the ninth letter, where Saint Alban reflects first on his agonizing life as a soldier in the civil war, “Il me semble depuis quelques mois être sur un champ de bataille, où l'on ne porte que des regards inquiets dans la crainte de trouver parmi les morts quelques-uns de ses amis...”¹⁰⁹ War is, for the young Marquis a manifestation of human depravity; this war is but a symptom of the debased Revolution:

La vie la plus retirée, la conduite la plus circonspecte ne peuvent faire échapper à la barbarie de la jurisprudence révolutionnaire... Quelle affreuse époque pour l'humanité que celle où les avantages qui distinguent les hommes, sont devenus des principes de ruine, et marquent du sceau de la réprobation ceux qui les possèdent.

¹⁰⁸ Fernand Baldensperger, *Le Mouvement des idées dans l'émigration française(1789-1815)*, 3 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1924) 2, p. 58.

¹⁰⁹ Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan, *L'Émigré*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 55.

Je me plaisais autrefois à croire des vertus et de la sensibilité au général des hommes, et à regarder le crime et la cruauté comme d'affreuses exceptions; mais une révolution est une fatale lumière qui découvre la hideuse nudité de la majeure partie des hommes.¹¹⁰

We see in a passage like the one above how Sénac integrates historical contemplation into the personal account, thus grafting the analytical subtext onto his literary fiction. Revolutionary trauma strikes at that more universal chord, where the personal experience is momentarily relegated to its broad, universalized implications. The divulgence of such a personal trauma once again highlights a great virtue, a primary function of the epistolary form, as we have previously noted—the element of intimacy—that we are perhaps not supposed to be reading these letters. This intrusion into the private sphere of the correspondents also appeals to our own sensibilities, for we are meant to sympathize with the suffering about which we read. When these components—contemporaneity, intimacy—come attached to a certain ideological disposition, which the correspondents espouse in their letters, what results is the inevitable association of a certain perspective of the Revolution with admirable, relatable persons. Such designs on the author's part do not appear to have been incidental; as Malcom Cook has persuasively argued, Sénac “seeks to make his major characters sympathetic and, through them, to encourage the reader to share their critical view of the revolutionary events. The picture of emigration and the émigrés is a sad one and the author uses his entire palette to paint a picture of devastating sensibility.”¹¹¹ It is true that Sénac implores the reader's emotional investment in the émigré plight, then erects a cause-effect paradigm that ties this suffering invariably to the Revolution, which is its ultimate cause. And while the mechanism of expression in the epistolary novel is

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Malcolm Cook, ‘The emigré novel’, *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution*, in Kristy Carpenter and Philip Mansel (eds.), (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 157.

ostensibly personal, the ideas themselves are expansive; emigration is a particular experience, yet by recognizing that disillusionment is not only a fundamental condition of emigration, but is emblematic of a broader French sentiment, Sénac transforms his novel into a profoundly resonant, grand memorialization.

The picture of the Revolution one can patch together from the letters is so shocking that the impassioned, unambiguously anti-revolutionary timbre which they typically take seems almost innocuous, a perfectly reasonable reaction to these events. What is more, this collage of revolutionary tableaux is an effective way of bringing the world of emigration into collision with the political nucleus of revolutionary France, often so far removed from each other. To incorporate such scenes into the novel, the émigré existence, which can at times appear as a world apart from its ultimate cause, is integrated back into the revolutionary milieu. We see this reintegration of worlds, for instance, in letter LV, where Saint Alban, writing to his confidant the President de Longueil, provides an account of one of his relatives who has just taken flight:

Un de mes parents... le comte de Verville, est arrivé hier chez moi dans le plus triste état; il s'est sauvé de Paris, après avoir été quatre mois caché dans une soupente, chez une blanchisseuse, et de ce misérable refuge, il entendait presque tous les jours hurler un peuple furieux, à l'aspect des chars funèbres qui conduisaient au supplice les victimes de la Révolution. Il a erré depuis, déguisé en maçon, en charretier; parvenu en Alsace chez son beau-frère, il leur a semblé un revenant; l'erreur d'un gazetier avait répandu la nouvelle qu'il avait péri sous le fer des bourreaux, et sa sœur ainsi que son mari portaient son deuil, au moment où il l'ont vu paraître... Mon malheureux parent ne put rester chez sa sœur, la garde nationale faisait à chaque instant des visites chez elle, et son séjour exposait la vie de

sa sœur ainsi que la sienne. Le hasard l'a conduit à Francfort où je l'ai rencontré...¹¹²

Having established an anecdotal foundation, the letter then shifts its focus from the account of Verville's emigration to what it *signifies*; Saint Alban is thus free to reveal the Revolution's true character, to show precisely the sort of broad moral and spiritual corruption that leads inevitably to an experience such as that of Verville; how it is, furthermore, a perfect microcosm of the revolutionary epoch:

Le sang coule à grands flots, et les spectacles sont remplis. L'insensible Parisien, qui se rend à la comédie, voit son char brillant heurter la charrette qui conduit des malheureux à la guillotine, et cette rencontre ne lui fait pas plus d'effet que lorsque nous étions arrêtés pour faire place à un convoi. Le fanatisme du peuple est à son plus haut période, et cependant il voit tomber les têtes d'une multitude de gens de sa classe; chaque jour, la liste des malheureux immolés se distribue, est affichée et est remplie de noms de marchands, d'artisans, de cultivateurs, de domestiques, de cochers de fiacre, et sur la même feuille se trouvent aussi des nobles, des princes, des ducs, des magistrats. La Convention nationale, monstre altéré de sang, dévore indistinctement, et rien ne peut lui échapper par son obscurité, ni l'éblouir par son éclat.¹¹³

This letter attempts to convey to the reader the true, horrifying nature of revolutionary France, as imagined by an émigré; Saint Alban here stresses the contradictions inherent in the lives and behaviors, the customs, of Paris and of Parisians in particular. *Roman de mœurs* indeed, yet as we see, it is not only those of the émigrés that Sénac endeavors to recreate.

¹¹² Sénac de Meilhan, *L'Émigré*, p. 179.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 180.

We must know from what, or whom, it is that they have escaped. Passages such as the one above, among the most visceral, impassioned moments in the novel, describe the Revolution, unsurprisingly, in deeply unfavorable terms. In a sense, this parallel narrative seeks to recreate the Revolution according to what the author understands to be its true character; to construct a tableau as seen through the lens of victimhood and resentment, written by those like Saint Alban and Sénac, who can think and write about it without the fear it instills in all other spheres of existence, in principle because they have already been cast out into the wilderness. Distance becomes a great weapon, a shield, and a prime vantage point.

This distance also deepens the chasm between Paris and the rest of France; awash in depravity and drowning in the blood of its denizens, Paris comes to represent the very antithesis of *Ancien Régime* virtue, a sort of modern Sodom. Sénac exploits these differences, like Balzac would some decades later—and as de Maistre had done a few years prior—to highlight the cultural divide, which was perhaps created, certainly aggravated, by the Revolution. Letter LV concludes by emphasizing this distinction, by illuminating the stark contrast between the reverent, provincial French (among whom one can count the émigré, who is virtuous by default) and the wanton Pagans who remain in the capital, complicit in the debased regime:

Les Parisiens ne parle que des Romains, dont ils surpassent par leur barbarie, les horribles proscriptions; ils croient que la démocratie est le plus beau des gouvernements, et qu'à l'exemple des Romains, ils soumettront tous les peuples par leurs armes; ils aspirent à plus encore, à les dominer par la pensée, en propageant leur doctrine dans tous les pays.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Here Sénac uses *mœurs*, of Parisians vis-à-vis those of the novel's characters, on the one hand to highlight the antagonisms one expects to find in abundance during civil conflict, on the other to augment the virtuous spirit of counterrevolution in contrast to that which it so fiercely opposes.

Sénac's unambiguous expression of antirevolutionary sentiment makes for a compelling, real portrayal of emigration, since this is precisely the sort of response one would expect victims of a political movement to have towards the regime and ideology which they view as responsible for their suffering. To this point, it is largely because of the prevalent ideological framework through which *L'Émigré*'s characters, in accord with the author, view the Revolution, that the work sustains its verisimilitude as an epistolary fiction. In contrast to the idealized political subtext in Charrière's *Lettres*, which at times appears cumbersome, unwittingly ignorant of the harsh reality of things, Sénac's starkly brutal characterization of events justifies the counterrevolutionary thought of his characters. The integration of these ideas into a literary text makes these characters, the novel, and the ideology of counterrevolution appear more persuasive, adding yet another layer of authenticity to the work. Where, for instance, in a novel like Rousseau's *Julie* or Crébillon's *Lettres athéniennes*, thematic believability relies on sentiment largely as its own end, or perhaps in service of the central theme of romance, Sénac's revealed truth—although not less sentimental or romantic in nature—is fundamentally an historical one. The extent to which he convincingly fuses sentiment with history—whose convergence we might say is an expression of *mœurs*—is the ultimate metric of the work's efficacy as both *un roman de mœurs* and *un roman historique*. And even when *L'Émigré* reverts on occasion to the *crypto-auctorial* constructs more common in the genre's earlier iterations, they are used primarily as a means of advancing the novel's historical and political discourse, although often under the guise of personal and emotional appeal. In other words, Sénac is less concerned with convincing us that the letters themselves are authentic, but rather that this revolutionary experience and its corresponding ideology are true and correct, respectively.

Perhaps one of the more lucid examples of the novel's historical realism can be found in the tenth letter, which includes a temporary departure from the epistolary world, in the form of the *Histoire du Marquis de Saint Alban*. An historical digression which masquerades as a sort of memoir, Sénac packages all his critiques into one cohesive narrative, centered ostensibly around Saint Alban's life story. This format is ideal for what both "authors" hope to show, namely the catastrophic rupture which occurred in 1789, its effects, and how they reverberated from the individual—Saint Alban may be thought of as an archetypal young noble—up through to the citizenry and ruling class, finally eroding the very socio-cultural fabric which had long held it all together. There is no *exchange* of ideas here; it is Sénac's opportunity to "create" the French Revolution, in the voice of his novel's hero.

What stands out in Saint Alban's account is how abrupt the *Ancien Régime's* dissolution was; the speed with which daggers were drawn once it became clear that the monarchy's days were numbered, and how effortlessly some of those who once stood on the side of the monarchy would abandon it in favor of the burgeoning revolt. This, in any case, is the image Saint Alban paints, as we see in the following:

Je fus présenté à la cour à dix-neuf ans, et quand je songe à cette pompe qui environnait le Roi, à cette foule empressée qui circulait dans ses appartements, à l'accent de respect avec lequel se prononçait le nom de Roi, à l'impression qu'il faisait sur les esprits, et aux affreux événements des temps postérieurs, je ne puis croire que ce soit le même peuple.¹¹⁵

The narrative *histoire* offers both a detailed, first-hand account of the Revolution as witnessed by Saint Alban and a reflection on the broader social implications, in this case regarding the shift in sentiment toward the king. The Revolution is observed and

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 64-5.

contemplated, it is something to be chronicled, but also explained. This he expands upon in the following passage:

Je ne puis concevoir comment dans un si court espace, des souvenirs graves par la main des temps, pendant douze siècles, ont été effacés; mais peut-être trouvera-t-on le principe d'un si étonnant changement dans le caractère ardent et passionné de la nation; peut-être un philosophe dira-t-il qu'un peuple qui dans son extrême enthousiasme adorait ses rois, qui baisait le cheval écumant du courrier qui apportait la nouvelle de la convalescence de Louis XV—qui n'avait rien fait pour lui; que ce peuple précipité dans une voie contraire, par l'emportement, devait être outré dans sa fureur comme il l'avait été dans son attachement passionné.¹¹⁶

By placing contemporary events within a chronologically broad context, Saint Alban creates an historiographical construct which frames the Revolution as a crossroads, as the end of France's ancient, historical traditions, as the culmination of mass discontent, which is expressed in his observation of people's abandonment of such traditions.

Saint Alban's *histoire* occupies a relatively small, but important portion of the novel; contained within one letter, some fifty or so pages out of the novel's four hundred, it is through this pause in epistolarity that emigration and personal experience fade, replaced by the high drama of revolutionary Paris. We are transported back to the origins of Saint Alban's ordeal, given adequate background so that we might understand how emigration instructs a certain view of the Revolution, one which is rationalized by recreating, then analyzing the event as something separate from the rest of the novel. This sort of historical exposition, which elsewhere in prose fictions one expects to be given, at least in part, in the author or the narrator's voice—in either case as context, to some extent, outside of the

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 65.

work's "action"—is integrated into the correspondence, in some manner or other by the diegetic means we have discussed. Having established and developed elsewhere in the novel the tenets of emigration, the virtue and travails of the émigré, Sénac uses Saint Alban's digression to write a discursive, polemic history of the French Revolution, in the voice of an émigré.

The presence of this sort of digression in a novel like *L'Émigré*—one written immediately after the events recounted—suggests that the author seeks recourse to treat the Revolution as an event which can be conceived, at least somewhat, as definite; thus, he can write it in more historical terms. A clear break with the chronological immediacy of the letters, this digression is a sort of literary *mise en abîme*, a pseudo-autonomous text within the novel that has free reign to develop a narrative beyond the purview of the novel's action and, to some extent, of its characters. In *L'Émigré* the parallel narration never ventures too far beyond Saint Alban's milieu, although it is not coincidental that his perspective is largely the same as the author's. The conspicuous inclusion of long critiques, for example, of Jacques Necker, the former French minister of finance—with whom Sénac had an ongoing, well-documented dispute—shows how this type of digression can seamlessly integrate political discourse while not obscuring the divide between author and character.

Sénac was certainly not alone among his contemporaries in finding utility in this sort of textual construct. Madame de Genlis, in *Les Petits émigrés*, places a similar *faux-mémoire* in the correspondence to give a comprehensive background to one of the novel's characters, while using this memoir, like Sénac, to explore the personal and historical importance of the Revolution. Over the course of the fifty or so pages which constitute the *Mémoires d'Eugène de Vilmore*, we learn how the young Eugène (he is only 9 years old at the commencement of his writing, in 1791) became an émigré, the effects this had on his aristocratic family, and perhaps most important, the influence of these experiences on his view of the Revolution and revolutionary France. Unsurprisingly his opinion of both is negative, although without his exposition, such views might appear puerile or reactionary. After all, we are reading the

thoughts of a child, as the novel's title suggests. This is an important detail when we consider the way a character such as Eugène thinks about the Revolution. The *Ancien Régime* is for someone born in its twilight either the vague memory of an infantile mind or a sort of fairy tale; there is perhaps little difference between the two. The Revolution is therefore the sole reality; it is both past and present, all else is as good as fantasy. And even if, as is often the case, the young exiles are ostensibly royalist, it is not necessarily because of any earnest nostalgia they feel for the monarchy, but rather because the Revolution is the singular cause of all their troubles, having deprived them of all luxury, status, and importantly, by having separated them—sometimes permanently—from their parents. The Revolution has robbed them of their birthright, in other words, and has also taken their families; this is clearly the case for Eugène, as it was for Saint Alban. The revolutionary orphan, a character seen often in the literature of the period, finds himself secluded and, much like the disillusioned romantic he will become (and which we discuss in the next chapter), seems to find a respite only while writing out his despair.¹¹⁷

Whatever our assumptions about a character like Eugène regarding his disposition to view the Revolution as utterly corrupt and immoral, his account involves describing, then making sense of the events of his childhood. Like Saint Alban he aspires to write a history—whether knowingly or not—with himself as its narrator. And similar also to Sénac's view, that the Revolution is an event particularly amenable to the literary art, *Les Petits émigrés* represents the experiences of its characters as surreal, 'fictional'. Take for instance Eugène's characterization of revolutionary violence, when recounting a revolt at his familial estate, as “une bacchanale terrible de coups de fusils”, a remarkably vivid image of the peasantry as they pillage his uncle's game reserve.¹¹⁸ There is a sort of madness, an incoherency or irrationality to the scene; despite the apparent kindness shown to these peasants, they

¹¹⁷ See, for ex. my discussion of Charles Nodier's *Thérèse Aubert* in the following chapter.

¹¹⁸ Madame de Genlis, *Les Petits émigrés ou correspondance de quelques enfans*, (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821), p. 78.

nevertheless revert to what Eugène describes as barbarism, once the extant class hierarchy begins to falter. Is this representative of France more broadly? As we saw in Saint Alban's description of the perfidious, cynical nobility, Eugène views these peasants as resentful, destructive, and infected with the very same ideological contagion as their new rulers.

A scene such as this has a great bearing upon Eugène's memory of the Revolution, a fact which becomes more obvious when his writing shifts from a narrative account to a sort of contemplation on the Revolution. Consider the following, where Eugène offers a critique of the Revolution according to those ideas which both inspired it in the first place, and shaped its outcomes:

Un des plus grands maux causés par la Révolution est, selon moi, cet esprit d'indépendance et cette ridicule présomption qu'elle a donnée à tant de jeunes gens. La philosophie modern avait commencé à relâcher les liens sacrés du respect filial; sur la lecture de quelques mauvaises brochures, un jeune homme, devenu esprit fort, méprisait la morale et les principes d'un père religieux; et adjourd'hui [sic] il adopte aussi légèrement des systèmes qu'il ne peut comprendre, et se glorifie de ne penser, ni comme ses parents, ni comme ses instituteurs.¹¹⁹

This passage is essential to understanding how Eugène's experiences instruct his conception of the historical events he is living through. Where much of the rest of his memoirs—and the broader plot of *Les Petits émigrés*—tells a narrow enough story of his revolutionary experience, these vaguely related, experiential strands coalesce around the “action” taking place beyond what is accounted for in the routine correspondence. And because his memoirs are written during a concrete timeframe (1791-4), we can often discern a correlation

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 121-22.

between whatever it is he is writing about, and the Revolution which occurs simultaneously, beyond the text.

Even when some event occurs far from the novel's characters, in terms either of time or space (or both), there is still a sense that it is consequential, and importantly, that it is inescapable. A function of the epistolary genre more generally—because networks of letters create worlds of their own, ones based primarily on the discerning, even discriminatory perspectives of the correspondents—someone like Eugène ends up bound to a revolutionary mythos once it becomes that defining feature of his identity, for he has assumed some role in its very genesis. Having established himself elsewhere, for example, as a loyal subject of the monarchy, it is unsurprising when he frames 10 August (1792) as that precise moment in which his identity as an avowed enemy of the Revolution was etched into stone. In the history of the Revolution, the date signifies the storming of the Tuileries, the subsequent violent insurrection, and the establishment of a republic in place of the deposed monarchy. For Eugène, meanwhile, the date represents a critical turning point in his development, namely the day he became an émigré by choice: “On apprit les événements du 10 août et l'emprisonnement de toute la famille royale. J'entendis tout le monde dire qu'il n'y aurait plus de royauté en France: alors je déclarai... que rien dans l'univers ne me ferait retourner en France.”¹²⁰ The implication of this statement is that prior to that day in August, the Revolution was something which the passage of time would rectify; those in exile needed simply to await calmer seas before making their return. With the formal destruction of the French monarchy, an already precarious situation for émigrés becomes ever bleaker. The renunciation of this aspect of Eugène's identity is not necessarily the expression of ideology, nor the protests of an overzealous youth, but an ostensibly earnest reaction to profound personal conflict. His homeland has betrayed some sacred compact—one to which he is

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 109.

invariably bound—so he must reject it in no uncertain terms. This oath is one Eugène is unwilling to break, even if it means the abandonment of his *patrie*:

Je n'entends rien du tout à la politique, ainsi j'ignore lequel vaut mieux d'une monarchie ou d'une république. Je ne sais pas non plus si le roi de France a tort ou raison; mais j'ai promis sur l'Évangile de lui rester fidèle, de ne jamais *reconnaître en France d'autre autorité souveraine que la sienne*... je n'irai point dans un pays qui est gouverné par ceux qui l'ont détrôné, et qui le tiennent en prison.¹²¹

10 August evidently holds a place of particular importance in the émigré fictions of the revolutionary decade. A formative date in the story of emigration, certainly in contemporary fictions, in *Les Petits émigrés* it reflects the Revolution's ubiquity, its inescapable reach, if not on the bodies of these exiles, certainly on their psyches. Similarly, in *L'Émigré* the date signifies a moment of profound lucidity, where the Revolution's true character is finally revealed, eliciting a visceral sense of despair. This despair henceforth serves as a sort of lens through which the characters view the Revolution, a prelude to the violence soon to follow. It is a foreboding which Sénac expresses most succinctly, in Letter XVIII, where the Président de Longeuil reflects on the early days of emigration, the abrupt shift in his regard for the Revolution: "La journée du 10 août et la captivité du Roi remplirent mon esprit des plus noirs pressentiments."¹²²

These novels both reflect upon 10 August as a monumental historical moment, explaining it retroactively as a critical point of commencement. The date is assigned its meaning somewhat after the fact, with its mythmakers—the authors along with their characters—fully aware of the effects which were soon to follow. In a sense they also act as historians, although unrestrained by any aspirations to objectivity; they are best situated to

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p. 109.

¹²² Sénac de Meilhan, *L'Émigré*, p. 97.

relate the Revolution's "true", grotesque nature, which exists within the historical construction. This is a point expressed early in *Les Petits émigrés*—as a theoretical preamble—in a letter from the Comte d'Armilly to his son Édouard, another of the eponymous "petits émigrés":

Profite, mon ami, des évènements terribles qui se passent sous tes yeux; ce ne sont point des historiens peut-être infidèles ou mal-instruits qui te parlent, c'est le tableau frappant de toutes les passions humaines qui se déroule devant toi; tu peux acquérir en quelques années l'expérience de plusieurs siècles.¹²³

How Eugène and the other émigrés understand the Revolution they experience, and then chronicle in their letters, is instructed in large part according to this axiom, that they should trust what they witness and experience above all else, for the Revolution offers universal, eternal lessons in human nature and historical cause that are well beyond the reach and abilities of the chroniclers and their writings.

Having constructed poignant cause-effect paradigms in support of a certain view of the Revolution, 10 August comes to signify a foundational myth, one which condemns the Revolution for its usurpation of French identity as it was previously defined, particularly by émigrés like Eugène and Saint Alban. In place of the rigid monarchical order, according to Catriona Seth, a writer like Sénac sees a sort of anarchic depravity, the very antithesis of *Ancien Régime* custom, which reveals itself in earnest on the date of interest: "10 August is... associated with violence in part because of an upheaval whose characteristics derive from a grotesque carnivalesque spirit, and which is marked by a complete dissolution of conventional points of reference."¹²⁴ These points of reference are of course the institution

¹²³ Genlis, *Les Petits émigrés*, p. 8.

¹²⁴ Catriona Seth, 'The 'dix août' in literary texts', in: Thomas Wynn (ed.), *Representing Violence in France, 1760-1820*, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), pp. 83-4.

of monarchy, the royal family specifically, along with the very system which for centuries had governed France. Its abolition, the “carnavalesque spirit” which accompanied its destruction, reflects the antithesis of those symbols.

Both Genlis and Sénac represent 10 August (and the Revolution broadly) by viewing it through a lens of alienation, while stressing that this event highlights their sense of disillusionment toward revolutionary upheaval. Much as a later generation of French historians, Michelet most notably, would frame *14 juillet* as the seminal date in the national mythos of the Revolution,¹²⁵ these epistolary works established the late summer of 1792 as a foundation for their own revolutionary myth. As we have seen, the date signifies in both *Les Petits émigrés* and *l'Émigré* the abrupt transition from one epoch to another; the destruction of one cultural identity so that a new one, namely counterrevolution, may emerge from its rubble.

It is unsurprising, then, when these violent excesses instill in a character like Eugène a sense of gallant disobedience. Reaction thus becomes the basis for a new identity, one which offers an alternative to abject nihilism. Where the Revolution was perhaps barely tolerable, albeit from afar, prior to 1792, in the aftermath of 10 August and the massacres which followed a few weeks later, opposition necessarily assumed a sense of moral imperative, while emigration became a matter of life and death. Germaine de Staël, in her *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* (1815), provides an insightful historiographical framework for 1792, as it pertains specifically to the issue of emigration. According to Staël, it is necessary to distinguish émigrés who chose to flee France before 10 August from those who were forced abroad only in its aftermath.¹²⁶ The former did so almost as a statement of protest, while the latter fled as a means of survival.

¹²⁵ *14 juillet* is a critical date in Michelet's revolutionary mythos, both 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, and notably in his discussion of the *Fête de la Fédération* in 1790, which I discuss in the final chapter.

¹²⁶ Astbury, 'The trans-national dimensions of the émigré novel during the French Revolution', pp. 802-3.

Her account in the *Considérations* could be placed seamlessly into the novels of Sénac or Genlis, for it is the earnest reflection of an émigré:

Après le renversement du trône en 1792, lorsque le règne de la terreur a commencé, nous avons tous émigré, pour nous soustraire aux périls dont chacun était menacé. Ce n'est pas un des moindres crimes du gouvernement d'alors, que d'avoir considéré comme coupables ceux qui ne s'éloignaient de leurs foyers que pour échapper à l'assassinat populaire ou juridique, et d'avoir compris dans leur proscription, non seulement les hommes en état de porter les armes, mais les vieillards, les femmes, les enfants même.¹²⁷

A common theme runs throughout many of Staël's writings on the Revolution, one which in some manner or other frames 10 August and the related political violence as a pivotal moment in the epoch's drama. The identification of this date as the beginning of the Terror, for example, proposes a drastic historiographical change, one more closely linked to experience and trauma than to a political regime or *l'ordre du jour*. Across Staël's literary œuvre, one often finds that sentiment guides historical representation; according to Seth, in Staël's *Corinne*, these scenes of historical violence are presented as deeply sentimental and personal, when one of the novel's central characters, Oswald Nelvil, loses a close friend during the storming of the Tuileries. The entire moral tenor of the novel is effectively inverted, as Seth explains, by the events of 10 August.¹²⁸ It is another of Staël's literary works, however, the epistolary novel *Delphine* (1802), to which we now turn our attention. Less a mechanism for the inversion of moral tenets, the violence of 1792 serves here as a

¹²⁷ Madame de Staël, *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française, Œuvres Complètes XIII*, (Paris: Treuttel & Würtz, 1820), p. 1-2.

¹²⁸ Catriona Seth, 'The 'dix août' in literary texts', pp. 83-4.

catalyst for the novel's denouement and, unlike in *Corinne*, it is these events which propel the work's characters toward their tragic ends.

Between Revolution and Romanticism

In each of the texts we have encountered thus far, epistolarity serves the fundamental purpose, though characteristically so in the works of the revolutionary period, of representing *mœurs* according to a very precise temporality, reflected in space and time, as well as in substance or theme. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the letter, whatever its authenticity, exists in such a way as to approximate and represent reality at a precise, often explicitly stated, moment in time. These fictions, in other words, are rarely timeless; whether this temporality is established through extra-textual constructs such as the dating of each letter, or by thematic, even historical means (or some combination of the two), epistolary works are not unlike literary time capsules, which can preserve and timestamp historical conditions, from ostensibly “first-hand” perspectives. In the revolutionary texts of Charrière and Sénac, the Revolution as a contemporaneous event is itself the primary mechanism of this timestamping; they are fictions which, at each turn, express the Revolution's ubiquity in the characters' minds and lives.

Germaine de Staël takes a rather different approach to the crystallization of revolutionary *moment*. Even though in *Delphine* almost every letter is meticulously dated, for most of the novel these dates—unlike in *l'Émigré* or *Les petits émigrés*—do not function as historical signposts. Rather, the Revolution rears its head only as a point of reference to the discussion of social ideas which usually arise out of revolutionary politics. The Revolution exists and is very much taking place—the characters certainly exist within a revolutionary milieu—yet the novel's central themes of religious liberty, divorce, and the place of women in revolutionary French society, to name only the most prominent motifs, represent the

philosophical bedrock of *Delphine*. And it is these themes which, for most of the novel, feature far more prominently than the minutiae of historical-political intrigue taking place in the capital.

In some sense, then, these social themes first establish, then sustain, *Delphine's* contemporaneity within its historical setting. Although the novel's main plot centers around that generic convention of the impossible romance—here an often melodramatic love triangle between the titular Delphine d'Albemar, her *amoureux* Léonce de Mondoville, and his new wife (and Delphine's cousin), Mathilde de Vernon—this cliché framework is nevertheless supremely useful as a means of exploring the philosophical themes mentioned above, for it enables the author to infuse this drama in letters with a discursive element, one which imbibes the novel's timeless form with a pointed, historical substance. Within this plot structure, the characters can opine with both perspicacity and emotional investment on these broader social issues. In fact, the novel is at its most compelling when the issues closest to the hearts and minds of the characters are problematized by the Revolution, in moments where the external, political-historical circumstances dictate the terms of interpersonal drama.

The topic of divorce, for example, highlights such a confluence of personal significance with historical temporality. As the love triangle can seemingly only be resolved through divorce—which remains proscribed for much of the novel—the subject recurs with frequency, although it is in letter XVII of the *Quatrième partie*, dated (importantly) 27 September 1791, where it gains immediate, political relevance. In this particular letter Henri de Lebensei, often a mediating voice and the work's chief *philosophe*, informs Delphine that “Léonce n'est point irrévocablement lié à Mathilde, Léonce peut encore être votre époux; le divorce doit être décrété dans un mois par l'assemblée constituante, j'en ai vu la loi, j'en suis sûr.”¹²⁹ Lebensei is hasty in his assertion—divorce would only be legalized

¹²⁹ Madame de Staël, *Delphine*, Catriona Seth, Valérie Cossy (eds.), *Œuvres*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), p. 737.

the following year, on 20 September 1792—but the supposed imminence of this reform establishes the personal (fictional) within a historical milieu; the characters now depend on an external, historical chronology for the resolution of their personal, fictional conflict.

In the end it all matters little—for Delphine and Léonce at least—whether the Revolution ever delivers on the assurance made by Lebensei. Mathilde conveniently dies soon after, thus solving the novel’s primary dramatic tension; the scene is then set for the lovers to ride off into the sunset. Yet such an amicable resolution is inconceivable. The more moderate revolutionary principles of 1789 have reached their terminus at this moment in the novel—usurped by a murderous, oppressive regime—and one can already see the fractures form between the two lovers, well before their idyllic new life collapses in on itself. Léonce is the principal antagonist in this regard, and although it is his response to 10 August and the September massacres which finally condemn both him and Delphine to their fates, it is also clear from much earlier—April 1791—that the Revolution is becoming too much for Léonce to bear. This begins with a concern we have seen already in the other epistolary works of this period, that the expression of an “offensive” view of the Revolution might place one’s life in peril. It is a fear which Léonce relays to Delphine in no uncertain terms:

Vous savez, quoique nous en parlions rarement ensemble, combien les querelles politiques s’aigrissent à présent... En voyant le cours que prennent les événements politiques en France, je souhaite tous les jours plus, que l’on ne vous soupçonne pas de vous intéresser aux succès de ceux qui les dirigent.¹³⁰

In Léonce’s next letter to Delphine, however, it is more apparent that his concern is not entirely innocuous, but he too has begun to fall under the grips of partisan divide:

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 650.

Je puis au milieu des événements actuels me trouver engagé, quoique à regret, dans une guerre civile; et certainement je servirais alors dans un parti contraire à M. de Lebensei... Les querelles politiques de ce moment-ci n'excitent point en moi de colère; mon esprit conçoit très bien les motifs qui peuvent déterminer les défenseurs de la révolution, mais je ne crois pas qu'il convienne à un homme de mon nom de s'unir à ceux qui veulent détruire la noblesse.¹³¹

Although the justification here is made primarily in terms of class, for Léonce there is a more profound force which drives him; it is that same force which drove Saint-Alban and Eugène toward counter-revolution, namely honor, *gloire*. It is something that his very name and ancestry compel him to pursue; and it is utterly absent among the revolutionaries, as he explains:

La gloire même qu'on pourrait acquérir dans la postérité, ne saurait en dédommager; et certes il n'est pas question de gloire maintenant dans le parti de la liberté; car les moyens employés pour arriver à ce but sont tellement condamnables, qu'ils nuisent aux individus, quand il se pourrait, ce que je ne crois pas, qu'ils servissent la cause.¹³²

These virtuous ideals remain with Léonce throughout the remainder of the novel, intensifying in accordance with significant events during the Revolution's second and third years. Delphine, meanwhile, remains obliviously contained in the fracturing epistolary milieu, dismissing Léonce's compulsions as little more than a sort of infantile male hysteria,

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 653.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 654.

an early onset, perhaps, of the male malady.¹³³ When, for instance, the fleeing Royal family is detained at Varennes on 20 June 1791, Delphine is quick to surmise that Léonce reacts because of her, not for political reasons:

Je remarquais seulement, depuis quelques jours, que toutes les fois que l'on parlait du départ du roi et de la cruelle manière dont il a été ramené à Paris, Léonce cherchait à faire entendre qu'il croyait le moment venu de se mêler activement des querelles politiques; et il m'était aisé de comprendre que son intention était de me menacer de quitter la France et de servir contre elle si je me séparais de lui.¹³⁴

This reading of Léonce as insincere—a “weakling” or “seducer” as one scholar has described him—uncharitable though it may be, especially from his lover, is not without a dash of truth.¹³⁵ However, he is also undoubtedly principled, seeking honor in a society which offers a man of his station ever fewer options. This fact becomes clearer after the *coup d'état* and ensuing September massacres. Although the former is mentioned explicitly only with fleeting allusion, Léonce's initial descent into a self-destructive, suicidal despair, corresponds perfectly with *10 août*. His reaction, on the other hand, to the subsequent massacres is far more explicit, initiating the novel's climax(es) while ensuring his and Delphine's downfall and, perhaps, the very collapse of the epistolary genre itself.

The scenes of violence which took place in Paris during the first week of September 1792 merely confirmed what many had feared in the weeks prior, namely that the Revolution of 1789 had been overthrown or possessed, by something perceived by many as more depraved and tyrannical than its fiercest critics could have imagined. Staël describes the coup as a betrayal, of values certainly, yet also of the people (like herself), those who had

¹³³ See: Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

¹³⁴ M. de Staël, *Delphine*, p. 701-2.

¹³⁵ Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 131.

for three years fought tirelessly for the realization of 1789's righteous principles. This she expresses most succinctly in the following passage, from her *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* (1815):

A des criminels succédaient des criminels plus détestables encore. Les vrais républicains ne restèrent pas un jour les maîtres après le 10 août. Dès que le trône qu'ils attaquaient fut renversé, ils eurent à se défendre eux-mêmes; ils n'avaient montré que trop de condescendance envers les horribles instruments dont on s'était servi pour établir la république; mais les jacobins étaient bien sûrs de finir par les épouvanter de leur propre idole, à force de forfaits; et l'on eût dit que les scélérats les plus intrépides en fait de crimes essayaient la tête de Méduse sur les différents chefs de parti, afin de se débarrasser de tous ceux qui n'en pouvaient supporter l'aspect.¹³⁶

Staël's narrative of this critical moment in the Revolution is drawn in large part from her own experiences, which she justifies by appealing to the incomprehensibility of this turn of events:

Les détails de ces horribles massacres repoussent l'imagination, et ne fournissent rien à la pensée. Je m'en tiendrai donc à raconter ce que j'ai vu moi-même à cette époque; peut-être est-ce la meilleure manière d'en donner une idée.¹³⁷

Although published over a decade after *Delphine*, Staël's personal account offers additional context to the way this same series of events serves as a crucial flashpoint in her novel. What is described in the *Considérations* as a fracture in the historiographical sense—i.e. where the

¹³⁶ M. de Staël, *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*, p. 61-2.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 62.

Revolution of 1789 and that of '92 each represent distinct phases, one might even say distinct revolutions—Staël represents in *Delphine*, additionally, as a fracture of the self. As previously noted, the overthrow of the monarchy comes with little more than passing note in the letters; the September massacres, however, are treated with greater attention. A novel which has been somewhat restrained in its direct engagement with its own historical setting is abruptly immersed in its moment, while the surviving characters are now unambiguously beholden to events external to their epistolary universe. Léonce, who to this point in the novel has not been the most political of animals, undergoes a transformation in response to the events which unfold; his reaction is visceral, his words reflect a poignant manifestation of terror. In his final letter to Delphine—which doubles as a suicide note—political violence serves as a catalyst, perhaps an excuse, to seek out an honorable death. The entire ordeal is one which Léonce meticulously charts, to show us and Delphine that he is not a depressive coward, but a man worthy of his family's name:

J'ai appris les massacres qui ont ensanglanté Paris; tout est douleur, tout est crime! qui a pu se flatter d'être heureux dans ce temps effroyable? Ne vois-tu pas dans l'air quelque chose de sombre, quelques signes avant-coureurs des événements funestes?... Notre situation était horrible, je rougissais de mes faiblesses sans pouvoir en triompher, tout était bouleversé dans nos rapports ensemble. Je repoussais le bonheur sans lequel je ne puis vivre, la douleur allait faire de moi le plus méprisable insensé lorsque hier, en écoutant cette musique qui rappelait les combats, je me suis senti ranimé. J'ai su depuis d'affreuses nouvelles, elles ont achevé de me décider. Dans les combats, les hasards m'appartiennent; et je saurai, quand je voudrai, les diriger sur ma tête. Non, ce n'est qu'au milieu de la guerre que je pouvais soutenir la douleur de te quitter ; c'est là que la mort toujours facile, toujours présente, vous aide à supporter quelques derniers jours de vie consacrés à la gloire; c'est là que j'éprouverai des mouvements qui soulagent le désespoir

même, le sang qu'on doit verser, le péril qui vous menace, l'horreur qui vous environne, et tous ces cris de haine qui suspendent pour un temps les douleurs de l'amour; je serai bien, tant que le glaive sera levé sur moi, je serai mieux encore quand il aura pénétré jusqu'à mon cœur.¹³⁸

Consumed by a mélange of empowered despair and impotent rage, Léonce perceives but one path which might assuage his desire to fulfill this self-imposed ethos of *Ancien Régime* honor. Much like Eugène can discern no future for himself in this debased republic, so too does Léonce abandon, after this final correspondence, any illusions that life can continue for him in revolutionary France. Yet unlike Genlis' young émigré, whose sense of virtue causes him to scorn his identity, Léonce reacts with an Homeric fury to these very same injustices. An unequivocal rejection of emigration, Léonce chooses instead the immortal glory of a counterrevolutionary soldier, rather than a long, serene, and obscure life abroad with his beloved. With this, the novel's last correspondence, dated 8 September 1792, so ends the epistolary portion of *Delphine*. Both iterations of the conclusion, which immediately follows—one written contemporaneously, the other only after the original had received a sharply negative response—break from the novel's letter form. One can only speculate as to why Staël chose to alter her work in this way, but it is most likely because in her original conception of the finale, Léonce and Delphine die together in a melodramatic scene which would have lost much of its tragic effect, if it were retold in a letter by one of the other characters. To this end, we might say that Staël performs one final act of the epistolary charade, taking her place as chronicler of the lovers' demise.

As an alternative explanation, one might argue that Staël correctly understands this moment in the Revolution as the formal end of the *Ancien Régime*, and with it the heyday of the letter as a literary genre. Indeed, the relationship between a nation—its laws, *mœurs*, its

¹³⁸ M. de Staël, *Delphine*, p. 937-8.

virtues and vices—and its art conforms, she believes, to a paradigm of cause and effect. As Staël argues, for instance, in *De la littérature*, an early work of literary criticism written concurrently with *Delphine*, “L’ éloquence, l’ amour des lettres et des beaux-arts, la philosophie, peuvent seuls faire d’ un territoire une patrie, en donnant à la nation qui l’ habite les mêmes goûts, les mêmes habitudes et les mêmes sentiments.”¹³⁹ When one applies this reasoning to *Delphine*, it is at least plausible that the shift in narration reflects that effectual, cultural transformation which corresponds to the politico-cultural revolution.

Conclusion

Whatever Staël’s reasons for ending *Delphine* in this manner, the work abandons the letter, forsaking the Richardsonian illusion of authenticity, and propelling the novel into the postrevolutionary milieu during which it was written. *Delphine* was certainly not the last of its kind, nor even the last French epistolary novel, although much later works like Claire de Duras’ *Olivier ou le secret* (1821-3), Balzac’s *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1841) and Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk* (1845), so far removed from the epistolary milieu, are hardly worth discussing in this same context. Certainly, the so-called ‘economy’ of epistolary fictions all but vanishes by the first decade of the nineteenth century; the age of prolific epistolary novelists like Crébillon *fils* and Samuel Richardson was long gone, but so too did contemporary writers like Staël, Charrière, and Genlis abandon the genre around this time. One notable exception is the case of Étienne Pivert de Senancour, who published in 1804 the second of his epistolary works, *Oberman*. A stark departure from his predecessors, Senancour does not use the letter within the framework of exchange, but as a solitary exercise, as “l’ expression d’ un homme qui sent.”¹⁴⁰ Imprisoned by circumstance and

¹³⁹ Madame de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, Catriona Seth, Valérie Cossy (eds.), *Œuvres*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), p. 27.

¹⁴⁰ Étienne Pivert de Senancour, *Oberman*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 53.

disillusionment, the novel's sole correspondent picks up precisely where *Delphine* ends. His affliction, an early instance of the *mal du siècle*, causes Oberman to recede from this new epoch; "ayant ressenti profondément les effets négatifs du traumatisme révolutionnaire", according to Bénichou, "[il] demeura le plus fidèle à l'esprit du XVIII^e siècle."¹⁴¹ Considering this profound trauma, which has scarred both character and author alike, it is understandable that Senancour avoids subjecting Oberman to the torment of reliving the Revolution. Instead, he invokes it as a monstrosity, which casts a long shadow upon this fledgling century, as "un non-dit qui informe l'imaginaire, qui conditionne le discours philosophique et moral, et qui rend aussi bien compte du drame existentiel que traversent les personnages."¹⁴² The Revolution, that event which strikes a wedge between the novel's two intellectual currents—Rousseauian sentimentalism and the *mal du siècle*—is rarely mentioned, but almost always present.¹⁴³

Oberman's unwillingness to directly confront the Revolution, even whilst in the sanctuary of his mind—a correspondence of one—is not, conceptually speaking, dissimilar to the ways Eugène and Léonce have reacted to their own similar ordeals. In the cases of all three we find young men (a child in the case of Eugène) who have become so disillusioned, so profoundly traumatized by the Revolution, that they must abandon their lives. Oberman flees into the state of nature—a Rousseauian reverie—where he addresses his epistles to no one, while for Eugène and Léonce this escape is literal, as a refugee and martyr respectively. The revolutionary trauma we find in these characters, who despair each in their own way, is not merely emblematic of these circumstances; they are in some sense pall bearers of French monarchy, the revolutionary decade, and the epistolary novel. It might therefore be said that this literary generation—along with those discussed in the introduction—was among the

¹⁴¹ Paul Bénichou, *Romantismes français I: Le sacre de l'écrivain; Le temps des prophètes*, in *Romantismes français*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 187.

¹⁴² Senancour, *Oberman*, p. 35.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 474 n. 255.

last to write amidst the *Ancien Régime* mythos; surely, they were also the first to venerate (or scorn) the Revolution in similar terms. The letter as a literary form therefore expresses for these writers a sort of confluence, of fleeting form with burgeoning substance; yet so too does it serve an important function in this period, as a genre disposed to an implied realism, which the letter so effectively conveyed in its heyday, and a romantic sentimentality, characteristic of the next generations of French writers. And as we shall see in the following chapter, early nineteenth-century French Romanticism picks up its literary treatment of the Revolution precisely where it was left by these epistolary fictions.

Chapter 2. Trauma, Disillusion, Mal: The Scars of Revolutionary Memory in Early Romanticism

Je venais d'échapper aux dangers d'une maladie grave, causée par de grands chagrins, mais au lieu de la convalescence qu'on avait espérée, j'étais tombé dans un état de langueur et de mélancolie...

-Claire De Duras, *Le Paria*

Introduction

In an early chapter of his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811), Chateaubriand recalls his frame of mind on the eve of his journey east, toward the Holy Land: “En quittant de nouveau ma patrie, le 13 juillet 1806, je ne craignis point de tourner la tête... presque étranger dans mon pays, je n’abandonnais après moi ni château, ni chaumière.”¹⁴⁴ Perhaps leaving France again evokes memories of emigration, although this is a connection he quickly rejects; forced into exile during the Terror, Chateaubriand stresses that this time is different. To leave France in 1806 is both voluntary and a spiritual imperative, not a matter of life and death, or the flight of *un trouillard*. The passage is fascinating also for the contradiction it expresses, where the author, who reveals to us the sense of disillusion he feels towards a homeland which has become unrecognizable, decides to leave for a world no less alien, to mixed results. Even those most villainous of characters who, for better or worse were still undeniably his fellow countrymen, are no more; in a revealing passage of his *Mémoires*, written decades later, Chateaubriand seems to lament the disappearance of the

¹⁴⁴ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem et de Jérusalem à Paris*, in *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*, ed. by Maurice Regard, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), p. 770.

society he knew as his own and the one which supplanted it for a moment, gone as quickly as it arrived:

De tous les hommes que je rappelle, Danton, Marat, Camille Desmoulins, Fabre d'Églantine, Robespierre, pas un ne vit. Je les rencontrai un moment sur mon passage, entre une société naissante en Amérique et une société mourante en Europe, entre les forêts du Nouveau-Monde et les solitudes de l'exil: je n'avais pas compté quelques mois sur le sol étranger, que ces amants de la mort s'étaient déjà épuisés avec elle. À la distance où je suis maintenant de leur apparition, il me semble que descendu aux enfers dans ma jeunesse, j'ai un souvenir confus des larves que j'entrevis errantes au bord du Cocyte: elles complètent les songes varies de ma vie, et viennent se faire inscrire sur mes tablettes d'Outre-Tombe.¹⁴⁵

Haunted by these monsters of his past, as he makes clear throughout his œuvre, Chateaubriand seems equally unsettled by their absence, and indeed the absence of anything familiar; this sense of being “un étranger dans son propre pays”, to have no true home in one's *patrie*, is the symptom of an undiagnosed malady, yet one which Chateaubriand had already identified and described in his earlier writings. We shall return to those works in a moment.

The sense of a profound, spiritual ostracism, of psychological exile, which was a hallmark, as I discussed in the previous chapter, of revolutionary epistolary novels (though for somewhat different reasons), and émigré fictions generally, did not by any means abate in French literature of subsequent generations, neither with the continued decline of the epistolary genre, nor with the end of the Revolution and gradual repatriation of many émigrés. To the contrary Léonce's suicidal despair and Oberman's solitude, in much the

¹⁴⁵ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, vol. I (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1995), p. 566-7.

same vein as Chateaubriand's disillusionment, were inaugural hymns of a new century.¹⁴⁶ One might consider Senancour's world-denial, his philosophy of reclusiveness, which runs straight through from his early epistolary works *Aldoman* (1795) and *Oberman*, to the aptly titled *Libres méditations d'un solitaire inconnu* (1819). In *Aldoman* for example—which is a sort of juvenile overture to *Oberman*—the author minces no words in his rebuke of society. Having witnessed and endured its vacuity, he concludes that it is necessary to look elsewhere if one wishes to find any semblance of happiness: “J’ai vu ces hommes assemblés pour leur bien commun, et les efforts qu’ils font pour se nuire sans cesse: j’ai vu les villes, les plaisirs et les joies qu’elles promettent; mais je connais la vanité de ces plaisirs, de ces joies, de ces promesses.”¹⁴⁷ If the author's characterization of society (and specifically of postrevolutionary France) is accurate—that it is hollow, vain, and cynical—where might an alternative be found? Unsurprisingly solitude, at least for someone with Senancour's disposition, provides a foil to this spiritually corrupt existence. As he explains in a footnote to the above passage: “La solitude absolue n’est pas la seule voie du bonheur, mais peut-être la plus sûre.”¹⁴⁸ Whether the cure for the *mal* is to flee one's country, in search of antiquity's lost virtues, or to recede into the sanctuary of the self, both Chateaubriand and Senancour—along with those writers whose works we shall henceforth discuss, in this chapter and the next—are compelled to reexamine their place in a society which has just undergone a monumental, violent transformation.

In the following chapter, then, I hope to show precisely how this psycho-spiritual affliction, which was in principle both a reaction to, and an effect of the French Revolution, shaped and directed the Revolution's memory—in sentimental, literary, and historical terms—in prose fictions of the nineteenth century's first decades. The link between the

¹⁴⁶ Yves de la Quérière, “René” et “Oberman”: Dialectique du mal du siècle’, *Romance Notes*, 14.1 (1972), pp. 75-82.

¹⁴⁷ Senancour, *Aldoman, ou le bonheur dans l’obscurité*, (Paris: Les Presses françaises, 1925), p. 78.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*

Revolution and *mal du siècle* is well established—taken for granted even—among scholars of nineteenth-century French literature and cultural historians alike. I am interested here in going further, by exploring the myriad ways these first generations of postrevolutionary French writers understood and recreated the Revolution in their works. Having established, at the end of the previous chapter, the genesis of this important Romantic current, I shall demonstrate that the *mal du siècle*, understood here as a uniquely French literary motif brought about by the Revolution, also played an important role in dictating the terms of the Revolution’s literary representation and memory, even in such cases as in that of *Oberman*, of *Atala* or *René*, where the Revolution is never mentioned explicitly, nor given any sort of overt thematic treatment.

A Revolutionary Affliction

If Chateaubriand was not the first to experience this disillusion—if indeed its seeds were first planted in the works of Goethe and Staël, Foscolo or Rousseau, those four sages of proto-romantic epistolarity—it has nevertheless been said that he was one of the important progenitors, of both French Romanticism and the *mal du siècle*. In his monumental study of the *mal*, Paul Charpentier anoints Chateaubriand the greatest exemplar of its emotional spirit: “la mélancolie n’a jamais eu peut-être de personnification plus éclatante que cet illustre écrivain.”¹⁴⁹ According to Armand Hoog, meanwhile, it is “the ‘mal’ of the Romantic soul” which Chateaubriand is among the first to conceptualize in writing, even if he never christens the idea with a proper name.¹⁵⁰ Chateaubriand does, however, provide a description of its underlying sentiment; in a celebrated chapter of *Génie du christianisme*

¹⁴⁹ Paul Charpentier, *Une maladie morale: le mal du siècle*, (Paris: Didier, 1880), p. 87.

¹⁵⁰ Armand Hoog and Beth Brombert, ‘Who Invented the Mal du Siècle?’, *Yale French Studies*, 13 (1954), p. 43.

(1802), titled *Du vague des passions*, he offers acute insight into this phenomenon, characterizing it first of all as an explicitly generational malady of the soul:

Dégoûtées par leur siècle, effrayés par leur religion, elles [ces âmes ardentes] sont restées dans le monde, sans se livrer au monde: alors elles sont devenue la proie de mille chimères; alors on a vu naître cette coupable mélancolie qui s'engendre au milieu des passions, lorsque ces passions, sans objet, se consomment d'elles-mêmes dans un cœur solitaire.¹⁵¹

This chapter in the *Génie*, written as a preface to *René*, associates the condition of the *mal* with the advent of a new century and the events which closed out the previous one. But how, we might ask, does the author translate this spiritual lament into a literary idiom? Furthermore, how does a work like *René* or *Les Martyrs*, both set far from revolutionary France—by physical distance and centuries—localize the *mal*, engage with the events which France (and Chateaubriand specifically) had just endured? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer to this question can be found, albeit implicitly, in *le vague des passions*. Complete disillusion from society, utter solitude in the world, these are the most painful, enduring wounds inflicted by the Revolution; they are the scars which cannot yet heal. Thus, when René proclaims “Je m’ennuie de la vie; l’ennui m’a toujours dévoré: ce qui intéresse les autres hommes ne me touche point” he is lamenting this psychological limbo, an existence devoid of meaning, yet a soul which still yearns for something.¹⁵² We might therefore conclude that it was this affliction which sent Chateaubriand abroad; following his emigration in 1791, he reconceived this voluntary exile, not as a desperate flight to safety from precarious political circumstances, but rather as one driven by melancholy and

¹⁵¹ Chateaubriand, *Genie du christianisme*, in *Essai sur les révolutions; Génie du christianisme*, ed. Maurice Regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 716.

¹⁵² Chateaubriand, *Les Natchez*, in *Les Natchez, Atala-René* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989), p. 415.

nostalgia, as an opportunity to escape to a place which he viewed as more amenable to the admirable principles to which the Revolution had initially aspired. As he explains in the introduction to *Voyage en Amérique*:

Quand je quittai la France, au commencement de 1791, la révolution marchait à grands pas: les principes sur lesquels elle se fondait étaient les miens, mais je détestais les violences qui l'avaient déjà déshonorée: c'était avec joie que j'allais chercher une indépendance plus conforme à mes goûts, plus sympathique à mon caractère.¹⁵³

Not quite so bleak and hopeless as Léonce's self-destruction or Oberman's world-denial, Chateaubriand finds in the increasingly radical Revolution a sort of silver lining; his life abroad—certainly during this first trip which, the author emphasizes, was one of adventure, discovery, and inspiration—is an opportunity for exploration and introspection, an outlet for those *passions sans objet*; an escape from the psychological torture of revolutionary terror, and consequently, a salve for the *mal*. Nor does Chateaubriand place despair at the forefront of his circumstances; rather, the émigré is at times reimagined as a pilgrim, while persecution is infused with a classical virtue, transforming it into martyrdom. This is clearly the case, as the title implies, in *Les Martyrs*. An historical epic in prose, the work attempts to “modernize” or repackage early Christian persecution, drawing a direct parallel between third century Christians and the experiences of the French of his own time. This is a connection which is stated unambiguously from the outset, as we see for instance in the preface to the work's third edition, where the author states that he endeavors to illuminate

¹⁵³ Chateaubriand, *Voyage en Amérique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), p. 115.

“une espèce de Martyrologe, une narration historique des persécutions de l’Église, depuis Néron jusqu’à Robespierre.”¹⁵⁴

Those parts of *Les Martyrs* (along with *Génie du Christianisme*, Chateaubriand’s travel writings, and *René*, to speak only of his earlier writings), where the text eclipses its historical setting, professing a morality rooted in the virtuous nature of exile, of persecution and suffering, as a means of assuaging and contextualizing the trauma inflicted by more recent events, provide compelling subtext to the shadow cast by the Revolution. Reading *Les Martyrs* as pseudo-allegory is therefore a most effective means of understanding the author’s view of revolutionary persecution. That it is set nearly two millennia prior to the Revolution, in a vastly different historical milieu, is largely immaterial to this end, for to suffer and perish under any oppressive regime is, according to this conception, the very ideal of a virtuous death, no matter the century. To sacrifice oneself in service of a benevolent institution, though specifically for the Church and Faith, is to this same thinking a timeless expression of what is good and honorable. Consequently, the muse sings:

Ce n’est point par la violence que l’on parviendra au but désiré. L’expérience a démontré que les Chrétiens se multiplient sous le fer des bourreaux. Voulez-vous les gagner à la religion de la patrie, appelez-les au temple de la Miséricorde, et non pas aux autels des Euménides.¹⁵⁵

Chateaubriand makes the very same point, namely that this specific type of violence and terror is comparable, across time and between civilizations—although he does so with a more explicit focus on the Revolution of his own time—in the *Essai sur les révolutions*, published a decade prior in 1797. The first of his major writings, the *Essai* attempts to show

¹⁵⁴ Chateaubriand, *Les Martyrs*, in *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*, ed. by Maurice Levaillant and Georges Lubin, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), I, p. 73.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 356.

that the French Revolution is intimately related in its character to those revolutions which preceded it, as he states in the preface: “qu’ ai-je prétendu prouver dans l’*Essai*? qu’il n’y a rien de nouveau sous le soleil, et qu’ on retrouve dans les révolutions anciennes et modernes, les personnages et les principaux traits de la révolution française.”¹⁵⁶

The *Essai* brilliantly chronicles this syncretism through abundant use of historical juxtaposition; not only does the past lead directly to 1789 (or perhaps more precisely, to 1792), but the Revolution itself can be demystified by reassessing historical precedent. Chateaubriand attempts to reveal some universal truth about revolution, to show that revolutionary violence and persecution, whether of his time or in antiquity, has existed throughout history, as part of a grand universal epic with a single historical origin and an inevitable terminus: “Chaque révolution est à la fois la conséquence et le principe d’une autre; en sorte qu’il serait vrai à la rigueur de dire que la première révolution du globe a produit de nos jours celle de France.”¹⁵⁷ He invokes these past revolutions and persecutions as a means of elucidating the ideal of politicized violence; a more comprehensive understanding of prior iterations of this fundamentally similar experience, in other words, can reveal to us a great deal about current circumstances. The Romans who exacted persecutorial violence upon the early Christians are similar, in nature and in deed, to the Jacobins and their reign of terror. And beyond a matter of historical contemplation, this strain of engagement with the past is also one which plucks at the author’s own traumatic memory, stirring the poet to action, as we see in the following, from *Les Martyrs*:

Si la Muse sainte soutenait mon génie, si elle m’accordait un moment le chant du cygne ou la langue dorée du poète, qu’il me serait aisé de redire dans un touchant

¹⁵⁶ Chateaubriand, *Essai sur les révolutions*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 253.

langage les malheurs de la persécution! Je me souviendrais de ma patrie: en peignant les maux des Romains, je peindrais les maux des Français.¹⁵⁸

This passage, a total rupture in narration, allows the author to interject his own emotional proximity to the work's historical setting, to Eudore and the early Christian martyrs.

A bold statement on the timelessness of spiritual anguish, by uniting souls across time and space Chateaubriand reorients the text towards the present, but specifically towards the Revolution, which is to say, towards his own life. Perplexing at first when we consider that *Les Martyrs* is in nearly every sense a work (by the author's own account) of literary classicism, a throwback to *grand siècle* literary sensibilities, it is nevertheless dragged into the nineteenth century, in large part by its contemporary historical—and experiential—subtext. By the author's own admission we can hear in *Les Martyrs* the echoes of his experience in the Royalist army at the siege of Thionville, where he fought and was gravely wounded. This is especially clear in the portion of the text which deals with the Roman army's encounter with the Franks; as Chateaubriand would later explain in the *Mémoires*, “Les souvenirs de ma vie militaire se sont gravés dans ma pensée; ce sont eux que j'ai retracés au sixième livre des *Martyrs*.”¹⁵⁹ Yet it is in another of his early fictions, *René*—and in the character of René specifically—that the author most effectively draws from the well of his own experience to express the postrevolutionary *mal*; it is in this short text that the representation of this spiritual affliction is, furthermore, most firmly rooted in the fresh memory of the Revolution.

¹⁵⁸ Chateaubriand, *Les Martyrs*, p. 399.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 604.

Far From Home

Much like Chateaubriand's other writings of this period, *René* takes place far from revolutionary France, in this case in the North American woodland, around eighty years prior to its date of publication. Yet as it is with those other writings of his, here distance is shortened by means of the work's emotional, or sentimental proximity to that traumatic experience. A sort of literary exploration of *le vague des passions*, René is an idealized expression of the author's (and his generation's) postrevolutionary malaise. This young European man, who lives among the indigenous "savages" on a largely unexplored continent, must confront his [mis]placement among the Natchez Indians. While he does make an attempt at adapting to their customs, the sense of alienation from the world, even this new and distant one, is made clear from the opening sentence: "Un penchant mélancolique l'entraînait au fond des bois; il y passait seul des journées entières, et semblait sauvage parmi les sauvages."¹⁶⁰ René therefore understands himself as an outsider—here among those whom he might otherwise consider outsiders themselves—for his disillusion is inherent, it is a feature of his character, like a chronic disease. He is more like Werther and Jacopo Ortis in this regard, those for whom despair is similarly elemental, without a distinct catalyst, and less, it seems, like Léonce, whose disposition is directly inflamed by current events.

This is not to say that René's condition is totally unaffected by such external forces; as Pierre Barbéris explains, world-historical ruptures, as shown in parallel historical upheavals—not simply the passage into a new century—act as the critical alienating force on character and writer alike. *René* takes place during *la grande coupure 1715-1725*, a moment of monumental change in France. As Barbéris argues, this *coupure historique* signifies a forceful break with the past—what he terms the "avant/après"—which annihilates in the titular

¹⁶⁰ Chateaubriand, *René*, in *Les Natchez, Atala-René*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet, (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989), p. 313.

character any sense of belonging: “René dans son récit dira avoir retrouvé, à son retour de voyage, un pays (la France de la Régence) qui lui était devenu étranger.”¹⁶¹ Barbéris’ reading proposes to affix the text to two historical settings, 1715-25 and 1789-93, which create parallel lieux of disillusion. The first, that of René who returns to a country he barely knew in the first place, to find it has become even less familiar. The age of Louis XIV has ended and with it, René declares, the France with which he identifies has vanished: “je ne pourrai t’entretenir de ce grand siècle dont je n’ai vu que la fin dans mon enfance, et qui n’était plus lorsque je rentrais dans ma patrie.”¹⁶² This is the first Revolution, which causes René’s disillusion; a stranger abroad, he has become a stranger at home:

Je me trouvai bientôt plus isolé dans ma patrie que je ne l’avais été sur une terre étrangère. Je voulus me jeter pendant quelque temps dans un monde qui ne me disait rien et qui ne m’entendait pas. Mon âme, qu’aucune passion n’avait encore usée, cherchait un objet qui pût l’attacher; mais je m’aperçus que je donnais plus que je ne recevais.¹⁶³

The subtext to the historical revelation above is one which reappears throughout *Les Natchez*: René is homeless in the most profound sense of the word, for he has lost all semblance of a national identity. Again, we turn to Barbéris’ lucid reading of René as an émigré, in the late eighteenth-century, revolutionary sense of the word. As he explains,

René n’est pas seulement un jeune homme que tourmentent ses désirs et qui cherche à vivre selon ses passions: René est un jeune aristocrate dont la Révolution a fait un proscrit. Symbole: René, comme son créateur s’est exilé lui-même de sa

¹⁶¹ Pierre Barbéris, *Chateaubriand: Une réaction au monde moderne*, (Paris: Larousse, 1976), p. 63.

¹⁶² Chateaubriand, *René*, p. 323.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 323.

patrie, dans laquelle il n'a plus sa place. Étranger parmi les siens, il est aussi étranger vis-à-vis de soi-même.¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, as Katherine Astbury argues, René's troubled view of France symbolizes his "own refusal to be tied by artificial notions of patriotism"—that it is "a state of mind reflecting perhaps Chateaubriand's own crisis of conscience engendered by emigration."¹⁶⁵ To read into *René* the politically (and historically) charged theme of patriotism as it relates to emigration, Barbéris and Astbury both recognize the implicit connections between René and François-René, emigration and the *mal du siècle*, and importantly, between history and fiction, which the author establishes to give a sense of contemporaneity to a work that is otherwise lost in the woodlands. This veiled revolutionary motif, although concealed beneath a lacquer of idyllic wanderings and alien encounters reestablishes the work's temporality, once again drawing an otherwise illusory plot closer to the author's present.

Having served in the counterrevolutionary army, while still clinging to his moderately liberal, ostensibly pro-revolution political leanings, the idea of patriotism was certainly complicated by Chateaubriand's own life experience; his conception of patriotism, which has perhaps been frozen in the *Ancien Régime*, is challenged when that idyllic vision must confront the violent current washing over France. This we see, for instance, in the following, from the *Essai sur les révolutions*:

Réduits à la plus profonde misère, encore pleins de l'amour de la patrie, on les [les émigrés] vit à pied sur les grands chemins, retourner dans les villes de province, où, plus connus, ils éprouvèrent tout ce qu'une haine raffinée peut faire souffrir.

D'autres rentrèrent dans les ruines de leurs châteaux dévastés par la flamme. Ils y furent saisis et assassinés; quelques-uns rôtis... à la vue de leur famille; plusieurs y

¹⁶⁴ Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle*, 2 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), I, p. 56.

¹⁶⁵ Astbury, *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*, p. 152.

virent leurs épouses violées avec la plus inhumaine barbarie. En vain les malheureux gentilshommes qui survécurent criaient: nous sommes des patriotes, nous vous cédonos nos biens, notre vêtement, notre demeure; on insultait à leurs cris, on redoublait de rage: le désespoir les prit, et ils émigrèrent.¹⁶⁶

How, then, is this sort of ambivalent patriotism expressed similarly in *René*? The sense of foreignness which René feels, on both continents, is alienating in a manner much like the author's own apprehension toward the prospect of waging war against his countrymen; however much he is repulsed by the Revolution's betrayal of its own foundational ideals, some part of him sees a virtue in proclaiming "nous sommes des patriotes", all the way to the scaffold if need be. To exist apart from—or indeed to stand athwart—one's own people or nation, inflicts a sort of emotional distress, a sense of futility in the face of historical force.

According to Astbury, this historical subtext is nuanced and must be discerned through careful reading of the text, as it relates directly to the author; for others the historical tether in *René* appears more legible, less ambiguous. Marc Fumaroli, for instance, is rather more explicit in his analysis, identifying an unbroken link between Chateaubriand's historical and literary-historical milieux, a link which, he explains, is clearly discernible in his fictions: "le spectacle qui s'offre à René dans la Nouvelle-France, en 1727, préfigure celui que l'auteur des *Natchez* a observé dans la France de 1792: là-bas, des Sauvages en voie de corruption affrontent des colons Français corrompus; ici, des civilisés singent l'état sauvage pour massacrer d'autres civilisés qu'ils jugent corrompus."¹⁶⁷ René is a mirror image, his American odyssey a thinly veiled allusion which the author contrives so that he may reimagine and confront both his experience during the Revolution and the more abstract face of revolutionary trauma. This project of historical continuity is a critical theme

¹⁶⁶ Chateaubriand, *Essai sur les Révolutions*, p. 292.

¹⁶⁷ Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 238.

in Chateaubriand's work, though perhaps nowhere else in his oeuvre is it expressed with such stylistic—indeed poetic—force.

The parallel historical timelines also serve to illuminate a deep socio-cultural rift which the Revolution created, between the *Ancien Régime* and the postrevolutionary nineteenth century. The fracture is not merely historical—nor are its effects confined only to the political realm—but it also signifies a complete transformation of *mœurs*, which implies the loss or destruction of ancient custom and tradition.¹⁶⁸ We can best understand this transformation according to two intimately related (although distinct) social effects: the dismantling of material 'wealth' linked to class-based privilege, and the (often) consequent dissolution of the social order which bestowed purpose and meaning by chance of birth, i.e. the aforementioned class-based privilege itself. Of course, the one is often entangled with the other; as we saw in the previous chapter with Eugène de Vilmore's account of the revolt at his family's estate in Genlis' *Les petits émigrés*, the *de facto* ransacking was a function of the erosion of class distinction. For Eugène this violent destruction warps his view of France, rendering it unrecognizable and no longer his homeland; without the birthright of noble privilege, Eugène is forced to exist in a society where a man's purpose may no longer be taken for granted. The postrevolutionary *mal* is therefore a crisis also of masculinity; as Margaret Waller asks, in her study of the "male malady", "in the androcentric fictions of French Romanticism... the question is... What is to become of some men now that they have become like women?"¹⁶⁹ Feminizing the hero in this manner implies a sort of ostracism borne of existential impotence, a psycho-emotional state which aligns neatly with the *mal* as it is characterized in the period's works. This anxiety of impotence is also, according to Naomi Segal, a result of the more personal intricacies of *the family romance*, wherein the Romantic hero is placed in "the vulnerable position of the non-inheriting son who fails

¹⁶⁸ Jean-Paul Clément, *Chateaubriand politique*, (Paris: Hachette, 1987), p. 27.

¹⁶⁹ Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 3.

visibly to be the father's legitimate firstborn double, entitled to his name."¹⁷⁰ Although Segal perhaps takes it for granted that the Revolution and its reforms played a crucial part in the Romantic hero's genesis, her conception of a wounded, resentful masculinity within the family dynamic examines the *mal* from a viewpoint similar to Waller's, namely that of a wandering, denuded, largely *ahistorical* man. Segal's reading is certainly true and insightful, yet it is incomplete. To view René in isolation—specifically removed from the context of his creator, who chose to stage his work decades before 1789, far from France—omits the critical, historical causes of his malady.

As Waller notes, *René* broke from an eighteenth-century literary tradition which placed so great an emphasis on plot; instead, the "frustrated and aimless hero has no adventures and the minimal narrative concentrates instead on the lyrical exposition of his malaise and frustration."¹⁷¹ One is thus inclined to wonder what this character archetype and genre might look like when it is set in revolutionary France. How might a direct confrontation with the Revolution alter the representation of both the *mal du siècle* and those characters afflicted with it? If we lend credence to Musset's claim that "Toute la maladie du siècle présent vient de deux causes; le peuple qui a passé par 93 et par 1814...", can a closer reading of those relatively few romantic works set in France, during the Revolution, provide us with a greater insight into the source of the *mal* and the nature of revolutionary trauma?¹⁷²

Tenuous Femininity, Dubious Masculinity

Many of the texts we have examined so far provide a somewhat vague, limited, or fragmentary image of the Revolution, giving us only bits and pieces. Much like the epistolary

¹⁷⁰ Naomi Segal, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 59.

¹⁷¹ Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 29.

¹⁷² Alfred de Musset, *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003), p. 79.

fictions discussed in the previous chapter, these early romantic works, while effective as modes of representation of the period's *mœurs*, tend to limit too much direct exposure of the emotional wounds which were left by the Revolution. Chateaubriand's early literary works, as we have seen, offer peerless insight into the postrevolutionary psyche, despite the physical and chronological distance which separate his characters and their worlds from revolutionary France. The author's acute understanding of his own historical moment would make a character like René or Eudore perfectly believable émigrés, or victims of the Terror; their emotional trauma is, after all, a reflection of, and reaction to, the Revolution. René was an important romantic archetype, so it comes as little surprise that we find his malady is emblematic of the times, and transposed onto, or mimicked in, other *enfants du siècle*. By placing such a character type in the Revolution's milieu, the *mal* becomes less opaque, its causes and effects more comprehensible. This, one might argue, could diminish the sheer force of an illusory, typically undefined malady; a plague is, after all, far more spiritually unsettling if its origins remain vague. And while it is probably true that in *René* one finds a zenith of early French romanticism, it is also the case that with the genre's historicization—i.e. the reimagination of this character *type* and his (or, in a few cases her) ordeal as something intimately related to the Revolution—the relationship between the *mal* and the Revolution becomes ever more apparent.

In Charles Nodier's *Thérèse Aubert*, we are introduced to a René-like character, Adolphe de S—a similarly disillusioned young man, aimless and solitary, yet brimming with passion—as he is forced to confront the Revolution and its effects on his emotional state and circumstances. Written in 1806—though not published until 1819—*Thérèse Aubert* is set amid a pastoral, romantic backdrop akin to Rousseau's *Julie*, Goethe's *Werther*, or Chateaubriand's *René*, although here the idyllic setting is disrupted by, and contrasted with, the Revolution. The story follows Adolphe, the orphaned son of an aristocratic family who, after being captured while fighting for the royalist army is imprisoned, mistaken for a young girl, and released into the custody of a local Jacobin named Aubert. Assuming the identity of

“Antoinette”, our young hero quickly finds a home among his unwitting captors, although this is further complicated when he falls in love with Thérèse, Aubert’s daughter. No longer able to conceal his real identity, Adolphe reveals that he is not really a girl. Thérèse dies of smallpox soon after, and Adolphe wanders aimlessly, though with the vague intention of returning to the battlefield; he is eventually recaptured and, presumably, executed.

The story’s primary dramatic themes are disruption and contrast, specifically as a function of the Revolution; much as the pastoral serenity is unsettled by revolutionary violence, Adolphe’s life and identity are likewise consumed and distorted by these same forces. The narrative begins by establishing the hero’s isolation and solitude: an orphan because of the Revolution, as he explains, “J’ai perdu mon père dans l’émigration. Ma mère a péri dans une maison de détention pour les suspects; je n’ai ni frères, ni sœurs, ni parents de mon nom.”¹⁷³ Having lost both of his parents, close friends, and his tutors—the latter of whom, he laments, fell victim to revolutionary violence despite their loyalty to the cause—Adolphe is essentially denuded and stripped, like Eugène de Vilmore in Genlis’ *Les petits émigrés*, of his aristocratic birthright. But unlike Eugène, Adolphe cannot even maintain a naïve notion of aristocratic honor, for he is an enemy captive. With his class and familial identity all but annihilated, Adolphe is left only with his dubious masculinity which, it is soon revealed, is itself dispensable in service of bare life or, potentially, of a new life.

Even before his capture by the Revolutionary forces, Adolphe already contemplates his androgyny, weighing his feeble masculinity against the more robust, “normal” manliness of his brothers in arms. As we see for instance in the following passage, Adolphe is acutely aware of his more feminine appearance:

Ma petite taille, mes yeux bleus, la couleur un peu ardente de mes cheveux
bouclés, la fraîcheur d’un teint animé que je tiens de ma mère et qui caractérise nos

¹⁷³ Charles Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 13 vols. (Paris: Librairie D’Eugène Renduel, 1832-1841), II, p. 283-4.

Alsaciennes, me donnaient, à mon grand regret, quelque chose de féminin et de timide.¹⁷⁴

The intent of this passage is not simply to paint Adolphe as prepubescent—as a “late-bloomer”—but rather, to prime the reader for the appearance of his female double, Antoinette. Nevertheless, his gender itself is never scrutinized by the other soldiers; it is only Adolphe’s musings which betray to us his own insecurities.

Yet somewhat ironically it is once he is on the battlefield, a male-only domain, that Adolphe finally loses his already tenuous masculine identity. Nodier alludes first to a latent femininity, even going so far as to draw what I interpret as a subtle parallel between Adolphe’s battle wounds and menstruation: “J’avais reçu plusieurs blessures dans les affaires antérieures; quelques-unes n’étaient pas tout-à-fait fermées.”¹⁷⁵ His injuries correspond perfectly with the first intimations of a loss of masculine identity and the corresponding emergence of a female one in its stead. It is almost as though Adolphe experiences in battle a sort of pubescent physical transformation which continues when, having lost his sword at the hilt—an unambiguously phallic allusion—he becomes totally impotent, as a man and, consequently, as a soldier; “Je perdis mon cheval d’un coup de feu, et mon épée fut rompue près de la garde.”¹⁷⁶ The sustained bleeding of his “wounds”, paired with the loss of his sword, appears to foreshadow Adolphe’s transformation into Antoinette. Useless from this point on as a soldier, he exists for a moment in a sort of limbo; not yet Antoinette, no longer either is our hero Adolphe de S...

It is also through use of language that Nodier emphasizes Adolphe’s transformation in this opening scene. In much the same way as the Revolution itself discouraged and even proscribed certain formal or “aristocratic” terms of address, Adolphe is linguistically stripped

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 288.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 292.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

of his masculine identity. Already mistaken for a young girl by the other royalist soldiers, he is referred to by a fellow prisoner as *une brigande*, a grammatically incorrect form of the masculine noun, an accusation which he only partially refutes,

Je suis la fille du meunier de P... qui est mort en défendant la république contre les brigands, et comme nous sommes une famille nombreuse et pauvre, j'étais venue au Mans pour y chercher du service. Je suis arrivée au milieu des événements d'hier; la peur m'a saisie; je me suis cachée jusqu'au matin; et je cherchais à retourner d'où je viens.¹⁷⁷

With this statement Adolphe de S..., son of nobility, is no more; what is perhaps most interesting about this metamorphosis is that even retrospectively Adolphe treats it as authentic, not as opportunistic or imposed. This he shows by using gendered grammar in reference to himself, as we see for instance in the above passage with the endings of *venue*, *arrivée*, *saisie*, and *cachée*. Indistinguishable from the masculine participles when spoken (though obvious, as we see, in writing), it is as though Antoinette remains an enduring, essential part of our narrator's identity, one which Adolphe is unable totally to abandon, even when he is writing his story, long after Antoinette's utility as a disguise has become redundant.

Loss of identity is paramount in the opening act of *Thérèse Aubert*; it serves as a critical thematic element that the author uses to show the Revolution's function as a purifying, destructive, and importantly, as an historical force. Adolphe is, in some sense a stand-in for France and its people, a representation of the broader struggle to construct a new identity from the rubble. Nodier opens the story by showing the reader what the Revolution has taken, what it has already destroyed: youth deprived of their families and titles; ancient

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 298.

custom and tradition proscribed and replaced by new dogma and means of worship; pastoral serenity shattered by civil war in the countryside. It is through this sort of loss, so Nodier seems to believe, that a nation can emerge with new purpose and values, with a new identity. As he explains in another of his early fictions, *Stella ou les proscrits* (1803), “Les révolutions sont de grandes maladies qui affligent l’espèce humaine, et qui doivent se développer à des temps marqués. C’est par elles que les nations se purifient et que l’histoire devient l’école de la postérité.”¹⁷⁸ A perfect summary of Nodier’s political ambivalence, the Revolution is a catastrophe with a cosmic purpose. And does this not, in some sense, reflect Adolphe’s ordeal during the Revolution?¹⁷⁹ Cleansed of his former self, the Revolution deracinates Adolphe, leaving behind a being without form. The remainder of the story shows what can happen when new identities are imposed, or run counter to one’s nature; once Antoinette appears in the text—at first as a case of mistaken identity, where the titular character’s father, a Jacobin functionary, presumes Adolphe to be a local girl—there is almost no semblance of the young man left to mount a resistance. *Thérèse Aubert’s* second act does not necessarily reflect the total erasure of the masculine—nor a total escape from the Terror. Rather, Antoinette signifies merely an illusory respite from Adolphe’s personal burdens, and the corresponding trauma of the Revolution.

¹⁷⁸ Nodier, *Les proscrits*, (Paris: Lepetit et Gérard, 1802), p. 10.

¹⁷⁹ This ambivalence compels Paul Bénichou to ask: “Y a-t-il une politique de Nodier?” To this question he responds that Nodier’s politics cannot be characterized by any single ideology, and certainly cannot be identified in a single work. Rather, Nodier is best thought of as a committed sceptic of all things relating to recent French political history; Bénichou does, however, assert that Nodier’s *désenchantement* emerges as a sort of reaction to the Revolution’s inability to complete its ambitious project. (See: Paul Bénichou, *Romantismes français II: L’École du désenchantement*, in *Romantismes français*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 1517.

Escaping the Terror

Nodier conceptualizes masculine and feminine identities in the first act of *Thérèse Aubert* as antithetical, both within the person of Adolphe/Antoinette. One comes to represent nobility, war, and the broader Revolution, while the other serves as a respite from these sources of grief and trauma. It is unsurprising, then, that when his masculinity is placed under the discerning eyes of other men (his fellow soldiers, the captives, and finally, President Aubert, who gives him the name Antoinette) its feebleness is exposed. Adolphe, who never laments the loss of that which had given him nothing but despair, seems to recognize that this new life is a rejection of everything he has known up to this point. As he observes the peaceful little town of Sancy for the first time, one senses that such a tranquil setting is as alien to Adolphe (from here, Antoinette), as is the female identity which he has just adopted. Here Nodier establishes the semiotic link between signifier (the feminine) and signified (the pastoral, almost Rousseauian *état de nature*). The link appears out of Antoinette's naïve perspective, as we see in her reaction upon first encountering the picturesque town: "je n'avais jamais éprouvé jusqu'alors une profonde impression de plaisir à la vue de la nature; elle m'avait quelquefois étonné, elle ne m'avait pas encore ravi."¹⁸⁰ At first glance, Adolphe's new life as Antoinette seems like an opportune escape from the battlefield, and the Revolution. Yet as Adolphe's new name suggests, a return to the outside world, to the one engulfed in revolutionary violence, is all but preordained.

The name Antoinette is not, of course, chosen without the most deliberate of purposes; such a blatant reference to one of the Revolution's most famous victims—in a work set during the Revolution, no less—must reflect some deeper meaning, and since M. Aubert gives Adolphe the name by accident, one can surmise a nondiegetic meaning. Neither is *Thérèse Aubert* the only of Nodier's works to include some sort of homage to Marie-

¹⁸⁰ Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 307.

Antoinette; in *Jean-François-les-bas-bleus* (1831), for example, the queen's death is prophetically announced by the titular character, in another instance of foreshadowing. Although the prophesy in *Jean-François* serves the double function of historically grounding the text, while showing the work of occult sciences, in *Thérèse Aubert* the reference to Marie-Antoinette is more ambiguous. Certainly, the name serves a similar function as an historical signpost, reminding the reader that this is still a story about the Revolution. Yet it also creates a sort of intrigue between Adolphe and his adoptive family; according to Mary Rice-DeFosse, it is conceivable that M. Aubert secretly recognizes the effeminate Adolphe as a royalist, giving him a name that indicates his recognition of the young man as an enemy, while still offering him sanctuary.¹⁸¹ This reading conforms to the work's prevailing theme of reconciliation, to Nodier's attempt at highlighting the shallowness of social divisions in general, and political divides in particular. Adolphe's life was torn apart by people like the Aubert family, yet Adolphe/Antoinette never considers that these Jacobins who have been so hospitable are his political enemies. On the contrary, Adolphe's only regret seems to be that he has passed himself off as a girl, not that he must conceal his royalism;

Thérèse et son généreux père étaient trompés. Je n'étais point ce que je paraissais être, et je nourrissais une passion qu'ils pouvaient un jour désavouer tous les deux. Cette idée me devint d'autant plus insupportable, il faut le dire, car la misère de nos sentiments se mêle à ce qu'ils ont de plus élevé, que je consentais avec peine à être aimé pour un autre, à dérober sous un habit de femme cette tendresse à laquelle il faudrait renoncer un jour, à tromper un cœur qui me donnait tout et auquel je n'offrais qu'un objet idéal, qu'un vain fantôme dont l'apparence allait

¹⁸¹ Mary Rice-DeFosse, "Nodier's Post-Revolutionary Poetics of Terror: "Thérèse Aubert", *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 24 (1996), p. 288 (n. 2).

s'évanouir et lui être ravie par une séparation pire que la mort; car il est moins cruel de perdre par la mort un être qu'on aime que d'en être désabusé.¹⁸²

Adolphe is of course referring in this meditation to his blossoming love for Thérèse, a love whose impossibility becomes the primary source of dramatic tension for the remainder of the story. The will to survive, in a purely biological sense, fashioned Antoinette from the enfeebled, emasculated young man; yet once he tastes romantic desire—a desire which remains unattainable so long as Thérèse believes he is Antoinette—Adolphe is drawn back into the fold, to pursue, like Léonce in Staël's *Delphine*, the masculine imperative, to its tragic ends.

Adolphe's sexual awakening, however, hastily resolves any lingering ambiguities of gender. By confessing his desire for Thérèse and choosing the inherent dangers of manhood over the safety afforded only to Antoinette, Adolphe sets in motion an internal conflict which will inevitably lead, so the ending suggests, to his death. As we see in the following passage, Nodier conceptualizes this crisis of identity as a struggle between two distinct beings, where there is room for only one. Frustrated by his impotence to act upon his feelings for Thérèse, Adolphe declares to the reader his triumphant return: "Je pris sa main, et j'en couvris tour à tour ma bouche et mes yeux pour ne pas lui laisser apercevoir mon trouble. J'avais déjà sur son cœur un droit qui ne pouvait plus m'être disputé, et Adolphe commençait à participer au bonheur d'Antoinette."¹⁸³ It can be argued that Nodier flirts here with an idea of gender that anticipates later developments in psychosexual theory, notably the Freudian conception of lingering foetal sexual ambiguities, as discussed in *Contributions to the Theory of Sex: Sexual Aberrations*.¹⁸⁴ The seamlessness with which he adapts to life as

¹⁸² Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 317.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 323-4.

¹⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, A.A. Brill (trans.), (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), p. 526. I have decided to include the relevant quotation, as follows: "The importance of these abnormalities lies in the fact that they unexpectedly facilitate the

Antoinette suggests that for a moment it is unclear who the narrator/protagonist is—that is, until the masculine (Adolphe) becomes necessary. More than simply an internal crisis, however, the dual personae are emblematic of the two worlds which each inhabits; the return of Adolphe must therefore correspond with his expulsion from the provincial Eden and return to the violence of revolutionary France. In other words, Adolphe’s awakening from this pastoral reverie—one which belongs entirely to Antoinette—is necessitated by those forces which are inescapable for a young man such as him. The sense of duty and honor to one’s comrades-in-arms, and romantic love for Thérèse, these are the two forces which impel Adolphe’s return. As we see in the following passage, a pivotal moment in the story where Nodier juxtaposes the agonistic relationship between Adolphe and Antoinette, the two identities represent a theoretical clash of the actively moral, chivalrous masculine who yearns for love and war, with the uncritical, amoral feminine, mollified in her stagnant Eden. Adolphe’s reaction to learning that his friend Mondyon has rejoined the war—and his dismay that he is not by his side—stands in stark contrast to Thérèse wallowing in her garden:

Mon sang bouillonnait à la pensée que Mondyon avait été si près de nous, qu’il avait habité cette maison où j’entrais tous les jours, et que c’était de là qu’il avait trouvé une occasion de rejoindre l’armée, occasion qui ne se présenterait peut-être jamais pour moi, à qui elle serait d’autant plus nécessaire que ma position à l’égard de Thérèse alarmait mon cœur de la honte d’une fraude et de la crainte d’une ingratitude... À l’entrée d’un petit jardin dont Thérèse faisait ses délices, elle se reposa sur une pierre brute qu’on y avait placée en forme de siège, et autour de

understanding of the normal formation. A certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism really belongs to the normal. In no normally formed male or female are traces of the apparatus of the other sex lacking; these either continue functionless as rudimentary organs, or they are transformed for the purpose of assuming other functions.”

laquelle elle prenait plaisir à entretenir les herbes sauvages et les mousses parasites qui croissent parmi les rochers de la montagne.¹⁸⁵

The author's conception of manliness here reflects a common Romantic motif which, according to Andrew Counter, imagines "masculine desire as characterized by an urge for conquest, domination, and the exertion of force."¹⁸⁶ This is certainly true in *Thérèse Aubert*, where Nodier uses a hyperactive masculinity to contrast the stagnant femininity implicit in Thérèse and Antoinette. What is more, Antoinette, and the feminine more generally, serve as both a restraint and negation of the masculine Adolphe, whose burgeoning manhood urges him to action. Thérèse, meanwhile, symbolizes unachieved conquest; for our hero, love and glory must be fulfilled, yet Adolphe will attain neither.

Once he has cast off the female disguise, Adolphe's dubious masculinity again becomes a focal point of the story, though not, in this second iteration, for its ambiguity, but because of inexperience. His education having been prematurely disrupted following the execution of his tutors, Adolphe lacks the virtue necessary to coherently articulate his love for Thérèse in a language she, as a woman, can understand. Instead, he must observe from afar, which he does, for example, at the town dance in Le Mans, where he is incapable of partaking in the joys of youthful love. Otherwise, he can express himself only in a vulgar dialect, one which Counter refers to as "a hyperbolic eroticization of [Rousseau's] 'state of nature.'"¹⁸⁷ In other words, Adolphe's stunted conception of masculinity wants for both the immersive education of *Émile*, and consequently, the innate virtue of Saint-Preux: he is therefore only able to mimic virtuous masculinity with glib, uninformed overtures. Adolphe blames this alienation on "l'exil et la guerre", the two events which "m'avaient privé de trop

¹⁸⁵ Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 329.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew J. Counter, *The Amorous Restoration: Love, Sex, and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 205.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 56.

bonne heure de ces innocentes joies de l'enfance."¹⁸⁸ Like other romantic heroes—namely Oberman and René—Adolphe's disillusion only entrenches his sense of otherness, driving him further away from the very society that was so hospitable to Antoinette, and back into the brutal, Hobbesian state of nature, which is, according to Nodier emblematic of France in 1794.

A Return to History

In the 1819 edition of *Thérèse Aubert*, Nodier added a short preface which alluded, like its epistolary predecessors, to the story's authenticity. By reimagining the work as a "found document" this *avertissement* suggests an extratextual verisimilitude which reinforces the textual realism that was characteristic of this type of personal narrative fiction, first by explaining the document's origins:

Le manuscrit de cette nouvelle a été trouvé dans une de ces maisons qui ont servi de prisons à une certaine époque... Il avait été caché, sans autre précaution, sous une pierre du pavé, de sorte que le temps et l'humidité en ayant altéré plusieurs pages, il y restait des lacunes que l'éditeur a été obligé de remplir.¹⁸⁹

Equally important to note, the location of the manuscript implies the work's climax, which is left unresolved as Adolphe awaits judgement in this very same prison cell; we can therefore surmise that Adolphe, unable to preserve, or even to finish his story, likely fell victim to the Terror. By design a sort of revolutionary memoir, the text is given a more concrete historical foundation from a perspective distinct to that of the narrator-author, a variant of what Naomi Segal calls the "confessional *récit*". The function of this romantic

¹⁸⁸ Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 351.

¹⁸⁹ Charles Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, (Paris: Ladvocat, 1819), p. 5.

subgenre, according to Segal, is essentially to serve as a long form narrative lament, written in the first person—almost always by a man—wherein he recounts the story of his life’s failings, which are typically precipitated by his entanglement with a woman; she must die, while he lives to tell the tale.¹⁹⁰ *Thérèse Aubert* follows this form, although with a caveat that the female character—here Thérèse—is not the principal cause of the male hero’s downfall, but is symbolic of the actual catalyst, the French Revolution. And the Revolution will indeed devour Adolphe, as it has already taken his family, teachers, and his only friend Mondyon. This is precisely why Thérèse cannot be held solely to blame for Adolphe’s demise; Nodier intends to show that the Terror is indiscriminate and barbaric, therefore Thérèse and her family cannot antagonize Adolphe, but must suffer the same persecutorial violence as he. Even the Aubert patriarch, by all accounts a loyal Jacobin functionary, finds himself swept up in the frenetic paranoia of ’94.

“Sait-on pourquoi on est mené dans les prisons, et des prisons à l’échafaud?” M. Aubert poses this question to Adolphe, whose response articulates precisely what is so baffling about the Revolution: how is it possible that a man as virtuous, as eminently decent as M. Aubert, could fall victim to the Terror’s persecution? The answer is simple, and one senses that Adolphe’s explanation of Aubert’s persecution by his own faction is really Nodier’s: “C’était un trop honnête homme pour ces gens-ci, et depuis longtemps je pensais bien à part moi qu’ils finiraient par le tuer pour le punir de n’être pas méchant comme eux.”¹⁹¹ As M. Aubert goes, so with him go fraternity and compassion; Mondyon too dies soon after on the battlefield, instilling in Adolphe a sort of survivor’s guilt, which further alienates him from the safety of village life. Once again, the hero’s masculinity is questioned; upon learning of his friend’s death, from Mondyon’s lover Henriette, Adolphe reaches

¹⁹⁰ Naomi Segal, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 9.

¹⁹¹ Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 354.

instinctively for his sword, only to find “une robe, l’habit d’une femme”, yet another reminder that he is not really a man.¹⁹²

It is this lingering sentiment of inadequacy which drives Adolphe back into the fray, to reassert his masculinity, avenge the death of his only friend, and to die. In a rousing lament, made directly to the reader, he proclaims both his grief and importantly, his frustration; the *enfant du siècle*, it seems, can do little more than wail into the ether:

Mondyon est mort! Mon père est mort! Ma malheureuse mère, que j’ai à peine embrassée, est morte avant le temps, morte dans un cachot... Tout ce que j’ai aimé dévoué à l’échafaud..., sacrifié aux absurdes rêveries de quelques forcenés... et j’ai des habits de femme! Ô Adolphe! Vous avez des habits de femme, et vous ne manquez cependant des vêtements et des armes d’un homme; tout cela est à votre disposition, et vous portez des habits de femme et vous croyez jouir de votre force et de votre raison! ah! cette pauvre créature, cette femme, privée de sens, qui vient de vous parler, qui vous mépriserait si elle savait qu’un soldat est caché sous les habits de la servante de ferme, Henriette est mille fois plus homme que vous: s’il lui restait, comme à vous, un morceau de fer qui pût donner la mort, elle vengerait Mondyon, et ne pleurerait pas inutilement sur des malheurs qu’à votre place elle aurait dû partager.¹⁹³

It is important to stress that the ultimate cause of this despair, loss, and misfortune is the Revolution; in some ways Adolphe is as much a hapless victim of providence as he is a willing participant and casualty of the revolutionary wars. In this way he is markedly different than Léonce who, while also acting on his own insecurities, with similar consequences, nevertheless retains some control over his own fate. The difference here is

¹⁹² *Ibid*, p. 363.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 364.

more than literary, it is one of historical perspective; Nodier views the Revolution primarily in terms of its brutality and cosmic, inescapable force, according to Bénichou as both “inhumaine” and “impuissante à tenir ce qu’elle avait promis.”¹⁹⁴ Rather than extrapolating this view of a particular historical moment into broader contempt and disillusionment for all politics, like Senancour, Nodier remains focused on the Revolution. In *Thérèse Aubert*, the Revolution is such a uniquely terrifying force because it appears so arbitrary in terms of its victims. The idea that today’s loyal patriot might tomorrow face the guillotine is central to the work’s conclusion; M. Aubert is but one example of loyalty rewarded with persecution, though it is Thérèse for whom Nodier reserves the most arbitrary, “natural” death.

Of all the work’s principal characters, only Thérèse avoids revolutionary violence, succumbing instead to a no less violent case of smallpox. Nodier does not subject her to this disease without purpose, for it is the culmination of an unattainable love which has followed the two for most of the story. According to Catriona Seth, the disease emphasizes the work’s motif of impossible love since Adolphe, who was inoculated from a childhood infection, cannot even contract Thérèse’s illness. Thérèse, for her part, is blinded and delirious, and therefore incapable of seeing Adolphe as the man he now is.¹⁹⁵ Their final encounter is tragic only for what it is not; Thérèse dies rather unceremoniously, which is to say, without the emotional abuse and embarrassment inflicted upon many condemned women during the Revolution. In addition to their physical punishments, women were not infrequently subjected to a sort of personal desecration; Madame Roland and Marie Antoinette were both mercilessly libeled in the press, before their eventual executions; Charlotte Corday’s corpse was defiled on numerous occasions, both publicly and allegedly, in private. Thérèse, meanwhile, is defiled only by nature, which is to say, her death is nonpolitical.

¹⁹⁴ Bénichou, *Romantismes français II: L’École du désenchantement*, p. 1517.

¹⁹⁵ Catriona Seth, *Les Rois aussi en mouraient: Les Lumières en lutte contre la petite vérole* (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2008), p. 335.

With the death of Thérèse, Adolphe, the failed lover wanders aimlessly, as a sort of Rousseauvian *promeneur solitaire*:

Je marchai plusieurs heures sans rencontrer personne, ou sans exciter d'autre sentiment que la surprise. Enfin, arrivé aux portes d'une ville dont j'ignore le nom, je fus arrêté par des soldats et amené en prison. Huit jours se sont passés depuis. On me juge demain.¹⁹⁶

We should note the important detail here that Adolphe is not detained as a prisoner of war, but simply, it seems, as a vagrant. In this last passage he becomes, like René, *sauvage parmi les sauvages*, someone who is innately out of place. Similarly to Chateaubriand, Nodier places a lost young man alone in the wilderness; the difference between the two works is that in *Thérèse Aubert* the foreign wilderness is revolutionary France, the savages are Adolphe's fellow countrymen. The effect of a less ambiguous, more historically precise milieu is that the sense of disillusion has a presence which gives the story a greater historical relevance; where René is plagued by a sentiment intimately related to the Revolution, it is the extratextual context which ultimately indicates this to the reader. Adolphe by contrast is a victim of the Revolution; in both a temporal and spiritual sense his entire identity is formed around this fact, so one can observe the trauma of his unique experience unfold and develop, within a cause-effect paradigm, in real time.

Alternative Forms of Disillusion

Intuition might have us assume that narrative fictions of the Revolution—i.e. literary texts set amidst the Revolution—should have been optimal for the expression of

¹⁹⁶ Nodier, *Thérèse Aubert*, p. 394.

postrevolutionary malaise, yet such works were, as noted in the introduction, relatively scarce among early French romantics. Chateaubriand and Nodier offer two distinct approaches to addressing revolutionary trauma, to be sure, although only the latter sets his work during the period itself. And while *René* is a superior work, in terms of its aesthetic and philosophical qualities, the young Nodier must be credited for boldly engaging with the Revolution, as both the source of a unique emotional distress, and as an historical moment worthy of literary representation.

Yet French romantics of this early generation were not restricted to a binary choice of either directly addressing the revolutionary milieu, as in *Thérèse Aubert*, or entirely concealing it behind allusion and abstraction, as Chateaubriand does in his fictions. One alternative was to situate the Revolution as a thematic antithesis that emerges from the story's backdrop, evolving from a secondary theme into a main thematic catalyst primarily to complicate the characters' personal lives. This is what Madame de Staël does in *Delphine*, where for much of the novel political developments occur in the background of interpersonal conflict. *Thérèse Aubert*, in contrast, follows an experiential revolutionary narrative—and is, unlike *Delphine*, told in the first person—where much of the story takes place within a sort of timeless enclave, that is until events catch up again with Adolphe, propelling him back into direct confrontation with the historical moment. But for Nodier the Revolution is never totally obscured by interpersonal drama, it is always the ultimate cause of Adolphe's troubles.

Conversely, in a work like Custine's *Aloys* (1829), we are told relatively early in the novel that historical developments have played a central role in shaping the protagonist's worldview and emotional state. And although *Aloys* is set in 1815, making the hero too young to have lived through the Revolution, it has nevertheless greatly impacted his emotional condition:

Je voyais la tyrannie, précédée de la terreur, et suivie de la bassesse, s'étendre méthodiquement sur le monde, et partout l'hypocrisie du maître garantie par la servilité des esclaves. Le délire de la haine s'empara de mon âme, et j'aspirais au martyre, pour forcer le tyran à montrer sa férocité; ce charlatan de clémence révoltait ma fierté.¹⁹⁷

In this short passage Custine integrates historical discontent into the hero's distress, perfectly capturing the broader, external causes of the *mal du siècle*; for the rest of the novel little is said about the Revolution, but this important point has already been well established and assimilated into the character's psyche, almost as a sort of generational trauma.

Although Custine implicitly alludes to the rupture caused by the Revolution (and Empire), in *Aloys* the event seems to represent more a commencement of history, rather than a clean break with the past, a contrast to the before/after paradigm we saw, for instance, in Barbéris' reading of *René*. This idea, that the Revolution is the generative moment in modern French history, is found elsewhere in Custine's thought; one is here reminded of the famous declaration in *La Russie en 1839*, where the author recognizes the Revolution's singular effect, on both himself and his *patrie*: "Certes, je ne suis rien moins que révolutionnaire, mais je suis révolutionné; voilà ce que c'est que d'être né en France et que d'y vivre."¹⁹⁸ To think of the Revolution in this way, that the nation, along with the minds and souls of every citizen, is in some manner defined principally by the spirit and memory of the Revolution, this is the fertile ground from which revolutionary myth can grow. *Aloys* henceforth takes for granted the formative event and its importance, which implies that the Revolution has been incorporated already into some collective mode of thinking, moving beyond the early century memoir and into the realm of historical myth.

¹⁹⁷ Astolphe de Custine, *Aloys*, (Paris: Librairie Fontaine, 1983), p. 46.

¹⁹⁸ Astolphe de Custine, *La Russie en 1839*, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018), Letter of 21 July 1839, p. 280.

According to Xavier Bourdenet, such a treatment is emblematic of fictions written after 1815; with the advent of narrative histories of the Revolution—especially in the latter years of the Restoration—such fictions served as a sort of complimentary piece to the burgeoning histories of the Revolution.¹⁹⁹

Often treated as a closed or finished event in these fictions, the Revolution serves as a backstory in some cases—for example, in many of Balzac’s novels—while in others it arises organically from within the narration, as the rather unremarkable prerevolutionary milieu collides with the critical, world-historical epoch of 1789-94. This is precisely how the Revolution emerges, for example, in Claire de Duras’ short novel *Ourika* (1823), where the titular character and narrator, a black girl who was adopted as a child by an affluent French woman, Madame de B..., uses a substantial portion of the short text to recount the revolutionary moment. In *Ourika* Duras employs a narrative approach not unlike Nodier’s, although her substantive treatment of the Revolution is a near-exact inversion of the perspective given to us in other romantic texts, such as those of René and Adolphe de S. What is truly unique about this work is that *Ourika* as a black woman, not a young nobleman, provides a radically different perspective of events, having far less to lose in the Revolution. In fact, *Ourika*’s experience runs counter to nearly all the characters we have discussed so far. From early on in the novel, which begins prior to 1789, she sounds unmistakably like René or Adolphe, lamenting over the sense of disillusion she feels in a society which is decidedly not her own: “Je n’appartenais plus à personne ; j’étais étrangère à la race humaine toute entière!”²⁰⁰ One encounters in *Ourika* that profound sense of otherness, the critical element of the *mal du siècle*, and this is reflected in how she defines herself:

¹⁹⁹ Xavier Bourdenet, *La Révolution entre mémoire et histoire*, in Aude Déruelle and Jean-Marie Roulin, eds., *Les Romans de la Révolution: 1790-1912*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), pp. 49-84.

²⁰⁰ Claire de Duras, *Ourika*, in, *Ourika. Édouard. Olivier ou le secret*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2007) p. 73.

Je me vis négresse, dépendante, méprisée, sans fortune, sans appui, sans un être de mon espèce à qui unir mon sort, jusqu'ici un jouet, un amusement pour ma bienfaitrice, bientôt rejetée d'un monde où je n'étais pas faite pour être admise.²⁰¹

Yet when the Revolution arrives, Ourika appears momentarily cured of this malaise, elated and optimistic, as we see in the following:

la Révolution apporta un changement dans mes idées, fit naître dans mon cœur quelques espérances, et suspendit un moment mes maux... J'entrevis donc que, dans ce grand désordre, je pourrais trouver ma place; que toutes les fortunes renversées, tous les rangs confondus, tous les préjugés évanouis, amèneraient peut-être un état de choses où je serais moins étrangère; et que si j'avais quelque supériorité d'âme, quelque qualité cachée, on l'apprécierait lorsque ma couleur ne m'isolait plus au milieu du monde, comme elle avait fait jusqu'alors.²⁰²

Ourika's momentary happiness, which as we see in the above passage, was brought about by the Revolution and its promises of equality, will of course not last. As both Sainte-Beuve and Paul Charpentier have noted, Duras' novels are marked by a characteristic melancholy, what Charpentier describes as "l'impossibilité d'être heureux."²⁰³ At the heart of this discontent, according to Sainte-Beuve, is the theme of inequality in all its many forms.²⁰⁴ For Ourika inequality is the primary force which perpetuates her misery. Her happiness is precluded, like René, by the sense that she does not belong, that racial prejudice will forever exclude her from the society that has taken her in. It is not simply skin color that instills this sense of otherness, but also the connotations of her race as a broader construct, which are

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 71.

²⁰² *Ibid*, p. 76.

²⁰³ Paul Charpentier, *Une maladie morale: le mal du siècle*, (Paris: Didier, 1880), p. 244-5.

²⁰⁴ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits de femmes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 112.

exacerbated by political events. Deprived of these social bonds, Ourika is condemned, as Andrew Counter explains, to a life without romantic love, she “is rudely forced to take cognizance of her own racial difference and of its baleful consequences: she will never know reciprocal love, for no white man—she (and the text) assumes—could ever accept a black wife, while she herself is a cultural stranger to those of her own race.”²⁰⁵ Much as the Revolution forces Adolphe to confront questions of his identity, so too does it compel Ourika to reassess how she is viewed in the context of her race, within both her immediate social milieu, and in broader French society.

The slave uprising in Saint Domingue—and the massacre of whites in the colony—is the event which most clearly brings the question of Ourika’s race into direct conflict with the Revolution, causing a total fracture in her sense of identity. As Marlene Daut explains, “the Haitian Revolution ultimately marks Ourika as a member of a race of ‘barbarous murderers’ since she bears the ‘stain’ of those who know no social justice.”²⁰⁶ It is precisely along these terms that Ourika describes her reaction to events; race, as we see in the following, imposes on her an inescapable sense of guilt, and shame: “Les massacres de Saint-Domingue me causèrent une douleur nouvelle et déchirante: jusqu’ici je m’étais affligée d’appartenir à une race proscrite; maintenant j’avais honte d’appartenir à une race de barbares et d’assassins.”²⁰⁷ This passage, and Ourika’s sentiment in particular, is a characteristic representation of revolutionary disillusion. She is in this respect like Eugène de Vilmore, cursing her own identity for the shame it has brought her. At the same time, Ourika’s predicament is reminiscent of René upon his return to France, or Adolphe wandering alone throughout the countryside, which is to say, she is homeless and isolated.

²⁰⁵ Andrew J. Counter, *The Amorous Restoration: Love, Sex, and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 63.

²⁰⁶ Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 302.

²⁰⁷ Duras, *Ourika*, p. 77.

Importantly, whatever hope she might have had that the Revolution would liberate her from the prison of her identity, is summarily dashed.

Ourika's return to a disillusioned state reflects a conception of the Revolution like that of Staël, namely that the principles of 1789 were betrayed by the violently radical turn in 1792. Her melancholy is of course inseparable from her race and sex, so it comes as little surprise to the reader that the Revolution fails to deliver, in any meaningful sense, on the hope which it had initially inspired in her.²⁰⁸ But while her misery is of course a consequence of identity, it is equally important to recognize that race and sex ensure she will remain tethered to her *de facto* owner, Madame de B; in a sense her disillusion is prepossessed and subverted before it can manifest as something which is meaningfully her own. Ourika suffers with her adopted class, as the aristocracy would and indeed did, and shares many of their sensibilities, but is by no means one of them. We see this, for instance, immediately following the regicide, where Ourika first describes the trauma inflicted upon her elderly guardian: Ce grand crime avait causée à Madame de B. la plus violente douleur... Madame de B. souffrait avec toute l'énergie de son caractère; sa santé en était altérée...²⁰⁹ Ourika, meanwhile, is relegated to the status of Madame de B.'s shadow: "Je pleurais, je m'unissais à ses sentiments, j'essayais de la consoler, ou même de la distraire."²¹⁰ In a somewhat ironic twist, collective suffering offers Ourika a temporary respite from her solitude; she finds in the Terror a nation of the disenfranchised: "je ne pensai presque pas à mes peines, tant que dura la Terreur; j'aurais eu honte de me trouver malheureuse en présence de ces grandes infortunes: d'ailleurs, je ne me sentais plus isolée depuis que tout le monde était malheureuse."²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 18-19.

²⁰⁹ Duras, *Ourika*, p. 78.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Ourika's story offers a compelling engagement with the question of identity as it relates to revolutionary experience, within the generic limits set out in works like *René* and *Thérèse Aubert*. Andrew Counter is therefore correct to point out that the racial element in *Ourika* is indeed "a variation on a wider generic structure", that it does conform in important ways to its predecessors. At the same time, the work's thematic idiosyncrasies do provide a total reimagining of the *mal du siècle*, by creating a revolutionary perspective not seen elsewhere in the literature of the period.²¹² By this we mean to say that *Ourika's* generic peculiarities—which stem from the central premise that it is, in part, a narrative account of the French Revolution, as told by a black woman—offer an entirely unique perspective of revolutionary trauma and, by extension, of the *mal du siècle*. Furthermore, the work's engagement with its historical setting is more than incidental, for it is upon this historical moment that Duras constructs and elaborates her heroine's malaise. Ourika, as a witness to history, allows the reader to share more directly in her "revolutionary" despair, which at times reads more like a diary than a novel, indeed with an intimacy comparable to that found in the epistolary fictions of Charrière and Genlis. This intimacy, so characteristic too of the confessional *récit*, ensures that such a text as *Ourika* engages with its historical moment primarily in service of a generic imperative, which of course places it far closer to *René*, despite the two works' vastly different historical settings.

The Problematized Past

The inherent value of first-person narratives like *Ourika*, wellsprings of insight into the intricacies of revolutionary trauma that they are, cannot be understated. These fictions distill general sentiment into the ordeal of a single hero. René becomes an archetype for the *mal du siècle*, a paradigmatic representation of the psycho-emotional effects of revolution,

²¹² Counter, *The Amorous Restoration*, p. 52.

while Adolphe de S. and Ourika—each in their own unique way—come to represent, in miniature, a broadly felt sense of despair instigated and inflamed by the Revolution they are living through. The primary function of history in these works is to give context and to rationalize the characters’ ordeals; historical sense is not the primary theme, as it would come to be in the Scottian romance and its simulacra, but an important component which serves to reinforce the deeper emotional and psychological themes. Yet with the emergence of the historical novel, which reached France via Scotland—concurrently, we should note, with the publication of the first narrative histories of the Revolution—to great acclaim in the early years of the Restoration, writers began to take a more rigorous and deliberate approach to literary representations of the past. At the forefront of this cottage industry in France was Alfred de Vigny, for whom the historical novel was an infinitely puzzling and elusive literary ideal, “le plus aisé des genres à mal faire, le plus difficile de tous à bien faire.”²¹³ Before delving into the particulars of Vigny’s treatment of the past—specifically the Revolution—it is important to say a few words about his broader view of history, so that we might better understand how his ideas evolved and progressed, culminating with *Stello* (1832), a novel which, as we shall see, infuses the revolutionary moment with an idiosyncratic reimagining of the *mal du siècle*.

By far the most popular (and commercially successful) of Vigny’s trio of novels was *Cinq Mars* (1826), a work which adheres to many of the genre’s basic conventions, while somewhat controversially abandoning other basic tenets thereof. For Vigny, history is largely a means, in service of artistic ends; historical accuracy can therefore be subverted, when necessary, if such manipulation of facts enhances a work’s artistic qualities. Vigny lays out this philosophy most clearly in the prefatory essay to *Cinq Mars*, titled *Réflexions sur la vérité dans l’art*, explaining that man,

²¹³ Alfred de Vigny, *Essai sur l’histoire et les historiens* (6 May, 1849), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p. 1075.

après avoir satisfait à cette première curiosité des faits, désira quelque chose de plus complet, quelque groupe, quelque réduction à sa portée et à son usage des anneaux de cette vaste chaîne d'événements que sa vue ne pouvait embrasser; car il voulait aussi trouver, dans les récits, des exemples qui pussent servir aux vérités morales dont il avait la conscience; peu de destinées particulières suffisaient à ce désir n'étant que les parties incomplètes du TOUT insaisissable de l'histoire du monde; l'une était pour ainsi dire un quart, l'autre une moitié de preuve; l'imagination fit le reste et les compléta.²¹⁴

Vigny does not argue here for the total abandonment of historical fact, but for its necessary manipulation into a living myth which more effectively resonates with the contemporary reader. In Georg Lukacs' view, Vigny "approaches the facts of history with a subjectivist moral *a priori*...", proclaiming "the writer's freedom to transform historical facts and historical agents."²¹⁵ Surely this is true of *Cinq Mars*, a novel largely fixed upon "great men" as representations of distinct moral imperatives, each signifying a certain idea: "Les noms des personnages ne font rien à la chose. L'IDÉE est tout. Le nom propre n'est rien que l'exemple et la prévue de l'idée."²¹⁶ To emphasize this point, Vigny invokes Othello and Richard III; in literary terms, he argues, we believe in both even though one of them is at most a highly embellished version of a minor historical figure (but it is clear Vigny thought Othello was a work purely of the playwright's imagination), for Shakespeare's tragic hero is "un TYPE dont le nom seul est imaginaire."²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Alfred de Vigny, *Cinq Mars*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p.7.

²¹⁵ George Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, p. 76.

²¹⁶ Vigny, *Cinq Mars*, p. 11.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The philosophical and aesthetic principles which shaped Vigny's conception of the historical novel are well attested by the author himself in the work's preface. His reasons for abandoning the genre, however, are rather less clear. As Bénichou notes, Vigny intended for *Cinq Mars* to be the first in a series of historical novels, what he described as *l'Épopée de la Noblesse*, which was to culminate with the French Revolution.²¹⁸ This project was never realized, at least not as originally conceived; Vigny would pursue other methods of engaging with the past which he believed were far more effective in service of his evolving literary-historical conceptions.

To this end his last two novels, though specifically *Stello*, are the realization of the author's philosophy, a synthesis of Vigny's historical and literary vision, as conceived in the preface to *Cinq Mars* and his marginalia. In one such musing, *Du roman historique et de l'histoire romanesque*, Vigny juxtaposes *roman* and *histoire*, explaining what each takes from the other, and what the implications are for them both:

Par une sorte de *fusion* qui a produit la *confusion*, l'œuvre d'imagination, le roman a emprunté à l'histoire l'*exactitude* et la *réalité* des faits, tandis que l'histoire, œuvre de la *mémoire* et du *jugement*, a pris au roman quelque chose de sa passion, de ses allures tragiques et comiques et de ses descriptions détaillées.²¹⁹

Although they are distinct written forms, diametrically opposed in many ways, the two are nevertheless intimately linked, as the above passage suggests. Is this a criticism of the one or the other? Perhaps, although Vigny seems more concerned with carving out a literary approach to the past which conveys the temporal truths found in histories, while retaining the sublime elegance of the novel. And yet, the novel was for Vigny that supreme vessel for

²¹⁸ Bénichou, *Romantismes français II: L'École du désenchantement*, p. 1093.

²¹⁹ Alfred de Vigny, *Mélanges: du roman historique et de l'histoire romanesque (15 October, 1856)*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p. 1077.

the expression of historical ideals; sustained accusations of falsifying history seem only to have reinforced this view and compelled him to write *Réflexions sur la vérité dans l'art*, which appeared as a preface to the fourth edition of *Cinq Mars*, after all other attempts to assuage the critics had failed. Mark Jensen describes Vigny's crusade against his many detractors as "a conceptual struggle concerning the proper boundary between historical and fictional narrative."²²⁰ If Vigny did indeed engage in an ideological battle over the literary representation of the past, *Stello*, as we shall see, was the locus classicus of his conception.

Fiction and History

Some years after the publication of his two most historical novels, Vigny would reflect on the underlying philosophical framework with which he aspired to recreate the past; in this fragmentary musing, he expresses an unambiguous preference for *Stello*, the later of his historical fictions:

J'essayai par *Cinq Mars* de retourner sa manière en mettant le drame dans les personnages historiques, et les figures inventées à l'horizon, ne peignant qu'à peine pays et nation. Mais je cherchais *ce qui convenait* à ma pensée; je ne l'ai trouvé que dans *Stello*.²²¹

Despite the greater commercial success of *Cinq Mars*, it was *Stello* which allowed Vigny to free himself from what he perceived as the pedantic critiques of his fact-checkers, and to explore the limits of history, the novel's potential, and perhaps most importantly, the historical novel's ability to fuse the two. Alphonse Bouvet effectively summarizes Vigny's

²²⁰ Mark K. Jensen, 'The Relation of History to Literature in Vigny's Thought before the Preface to *Cinq-Mars*', *French Forum*, 18.2 (May 1993), p. 166.

²²¹ Alfred de Vigny, *Mélanges*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p. 1071.

conceptual preoccupations in this regard, explaining that the author was fixated on the question “des rapports entre l’histoire et le roman historique, sur les limites de l’une et les droits de l’autre, sur la supériorité et la plus grande difficulté du roman historique.”²²² In Bouvet’s view, Vigny solves the problem of historical accuracy in *Stello* through the use of anecdotal framing. The novel’s titular character, who suffers from a melancholy not unlike those of the other *enfants du siècle* we have discussed, is taken under the care of the narrator/guide, Le Docteur Noir, who recounts to Stello the stories of three young poets, Nicolas Gilbert, Thomas Chatterton, and André Chénier, each of whom—like Stello himself—experienced a sort of *souffrance chagrine*, enduring this spiritual illness and dying under different, yet similarly oppressive political regimes. These anecdotes recreate their respective historical moments, although in this case Vigny could not be accused of distorting the past, for Le Docteur Noir is both witness to that which he recounts, and moral, philosophical guide. In other words, the work’s diegetic narration of these specific moments in the past allows Le Docteur Noir to tell his stories purely from his own perspective, not from Vigny’s, in service primarily of moral and philosophical ends. As *le conteur satirique* concedes, “Mes histoires... sont, comme toutes les paroles des hommes, à moitié vraies.”²²³

The third of Le Docteur Noir’s anecdotes recalls the final days of André Chénier, the French poet who was imprisoned and executed during the last days of the Terror, on 25 July 1794. It is undoubtedly the most historical of Noir’s three lessons, for although Gilbert and Chatterton were both victimized and harmed by the political regimes under which they lived—the former during the absolute monarchy of Louis XV, the latter under the reign of George III—the peculiarities of their historical circumstances are less relevant to their stories. Rather, the historical/political circumstances of Gilbert and Chatterton serve as

²²² Alphonse Bouvet, ‘Préface’, in Alfred de Vigny, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p. XIII.

²²³ Alfred de Vigny, *Stello*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alphonse Bouvet, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1993), 2, p. 647.

background to *Stello*'s core philosophical message, as Bénichou explains, that the poet, paragon of sublime intellect that he is, will often find himself at odds with the State in all its forms: "l'éternelle opposition du Pouvoir et des hommes de pensée."²²⁴ In the cases of both poets their disillusion is tenuously linked to the peculiarities of their societies at that precise moment; it is incidental that Gilbert dies in 1780, or Chatterton in 1770; what is important above all else is that they are poets. Chénier, meanwhile, is inextricably linked to the Revolution, his suffering a direct effect of a unique political climate; in other words, it is because Chénier is a poet in revolutionary France that he is imprisoned and sent to the guillotine by the terrorist regime. Historical context, as it relates to Chénier's experiences, is therefore as central to his suffering as is the fact that he is a writer (perhaps more so).

Vigny fittingly begins the first chapter of *Noir*'s anecdote, aptly titled *une histoire de la Terreur*, by recreating the frightening tableau that is France in 1794. From its opening lines, the sense of terror is ubiquitous, the atmosphere of despair inescapable: "Quatre-vingt-quatorze sonnait à l'horloge du XVIII^e siècle. Quatre-vingt-quatorze, dont chaque minute fut sanglante et enflammée. L'an de Terreur frappait horriblement et lentement au gré de la terre et du ciel, qui l'écoutaient en silence."²²⁵ Le Docteur *Noir*'s description of France in this first scene depicts an infernal spectacle, as though one is being led through the gates of hell. This as he explains is not merely an abstract sense of dread, but is all too visible, manifest on the people, "On aurait dit qu'une puissance, insaisissable comme un fantôme, passait et repassait parmi les hommes."²²⁶ His description here is not that of a people corrupted by a wanton regime, but of souls under the control of some demonic possession:

Leur salut ressemblait à une attaque, leur bonjour à une injure, leur sourire à une convulsion, leur habillement aux haillons d'un mendiant, leur coiffure à une

²²⁴ Bénichou, *Romantismes français II: L'École du désenchantement*, p. 1116.

²²⁵ Vigny, *Stello*, p. 558.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 559.

guenille trempée dans le sang, leurs réunions à des émeutes, leurs familles à des repaires d'animaux mauvais et défiants, leur éloquence aux cris des halles, leurs amours aux orgies bohémiennes, leurs cérémonies publiques à des vieilles tragédies romaines manquées sur des tréteaux de province; leurs guerres à des migrations de peuples sauvages et misérables, les noms du temps à des parodies poissardes.²²⁷

The sort of tableau which Vigny presents here conveys the spiritual essence of France as he perceives it during this period, balancing the real and well documented historical circumstances with an ahistorical, poetic ideal—the sentiment of *terreur*.

Subsequent scenes in the narrative each fuse historical setting with poetic embellishment, creating as it were a sort of mythologized image of revolutionary France. These literary exaggerations were deliberate, written as such to enhance the author's broader vision of an infernal France. We see this, for instance, in the following, in Noir's description Saint-Lazare prison, where Chénier was held for the last months of his life. In reality perhaps a slightly less despairing place, it is nevertheless necessary that the text embellish Saint-Lazare's true, historically accurate form, to reflect the author's conception of a hellish prison, one which is sufficiently terrifying so as to highlight Chénier's experience:²²⁸ "En 1794 cette noire *Maison-Lazare* ressemblait à une grande cage d'animaux féroces. Il n'existait là que le vieux bâtiment gris qu'on y voit encore, bloc énorme et carré. Quatre étages de prisonniers gémissaient et hurlaient l'un sur l'autre."²²⁹

Having examined the way Vigny transforms and adapts historical setting towards his literary ends, we next turn to the far more controversial incorporation of historical figures. Controversial most of all for the way they are integrated into the novel, here we see the

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Vigny, *Stello*, p. 509-10. See also: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits Contemporains*, 3 vols. (Paris: Didier, 1846), I, p. 348.

²²⁹ Vigny, *Stello*, p. 578.

author's most obvious break from the Scottian model, which tends to treat important historical figures as minor characters with limited dialogue, placing such figures on the periphery of the drama. Excepting for a moment Chénier himself, who is not an historical figure in the typical sense, we consider the novel's contentious depiction of Robespierre. According to Sainte-Beuve, *Stello's* glaring blemish is in its *mille petites invraisemblances accumulées*, and its one egregious adulteration, of the Revolution's most infamous leader; "l'histoire d'André Chénier serait parfait à mon sens et de poésie et de vérité, sans la scène arrangée chez Robespierre..."²³⁰ The eminent critic is not without reason, for Robespierre's wickedness does at times seem almost comically exaggerated, but contrary to Sainte-Beuve's view, the Jacobin leader conforms perfectly to the work's general tone; after all, one should not be at all surprised to stumble upon the damned whilst dredging the depths of hell. Surely Robespierre is evil, but in a vulgar manner; he lacks, in other words, the poet's divine will. As one scholar explains, he is less a monster than a petty gnome, "thrown up to power for a brief moment on the wave of social upheaval."²³¹ In some sense, Vigny strips Robespierre of his status as "great man", reducing him to a functionary, to an effect rather than a cause.

Nevertheless, Robespierre signifies an important idea in the novel. We see how Vigny represents forms in terms of their metaphysical presence, so Robespierre *l'incorruptible*, more than earns the moniker, for he is revealed by his essence as calculated, unfeeling, glib; in other words, he is the idealized political being. And since the precedent for Chénier's suffering is the eternal opposition of politics to art, Robespierre serves as the archetypal *homme politique*, the ultimate antagonist to the poet. This opposition is expressed clearly in the following, from the discussion between the Jacobin leader and André's brother, the playwright Marie-Joseph Chénier. Robespierre concurs in some sense with Le

²³⁰ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits Contemporains*, 3 vols. (Paris: Didier, 1846), I, p. 347.

²³¹ Maxwell Smith, 'Alfred de Vigny, founder of the French historical novel', *The French Review*, 13.1 (1939), p. 11.

Docteur Noir's prescription *séparer la vie poétique de la vie politique*,²³² although when appropriated by a political animal such as Robespierre, who views the revolutionary cause as ubiquitous and unyielding, it is not the poet's solitude which is implied, but rather it is his proscription which becomes necessary:

Tu sais, citoyen Chénier, mon opinion sur les écrivains. Je t'excepte, parce que je connais tes vertus républicaines, mais en général je les regarde comme les plus dangereux ennemis de la patrie. Il faut une volonté *une*. Nous en sommes là. Il la faut républicaine, et pour cela il ne faut que des écrits républicains; le reste corrompt le peuple. Il faut le rallier, ce peuple, et vaincre les bourgeois, de qui viennent nos dangers intérieurs. Il faut que le peuple s'allie à la Convention et elle à lui; que les sans-culottes soient payés et *colérés*, et restent dans les villes. Qui s'oppose à mes vues? Les écrivains, les faiseurs de vers qui font du dédain rime, qui crient: *Ô mon âme! Fuyons dans les déserts*; ces gens-là découragent. La Convention doit traiter tous ceux qui ne sont pas utiles à la République comme des contre-révolutionnaires.²³³

However ahistorical and contrived this scene is, there is perhaps nowhere else in the novel a clearer statement of the author's philosophical vision. The cause of revolutionary despair is laid bare, then codified in the poet's innate disillusion to show how this generalized trauma was enflamed by unique historical circumstances, the product of which is André Chénier.

When read as an historical novel *Stello* is not, as we have already noted, without its flaws; Vigny's treatment of figures like Robespierre and Saint-Just requires that the reader occasionally suspend both disbelief and critical historical thinking. However problematic such depictions may be, the poetic flourishes one encounters in *Stello* have an inverse effect

²³² Vigny, *Stello*, p. 662.

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 623.

on the representation of André Chénier himself. The poet is of course Vigny's archetype of disillusionment and persecution, like the early Christian is in Chateaubriand's *Les Martyrs*. And much like those persecuted Christians, the poet as Vigny conceives him presents a direct and existential threat to the State's power. As *Le Docteur Noir* suggests, the poet recognizes no temporal master, only deferring to his own creative genius, and to God:

L'imagination contient en elle-même le jugement et la mémoire sans lesquels elle ne serait pas. Qui entraîne les hommes, si ce n'est l'émotion? Qui enfante l'émotion, si ce n'est l'art? Et qui enseigne l'art si ce n'est Dieu lui-même? Car le poète n'a pas de maître, et toutes les sciences sont apprises, hors la sienne.²³⁴

Chénier is perhaps the truest representation of the *mal*, if one accepts, as I have attempted to show, that it is a condition of historically bound, postrevolutionary malaise. And while it is true that the poet-as-pariah motif certainly predates the Revolution—Goethe, for instance, began work on his *Torquato Tasso* just before 1789—it is also the case that disillusion took on a new sense during, and in the aftermath of the Revolution. Chénier's ordeal is ultimately one of broader romantic implications, namely the clash of the self with society, what Deborah Jenson explains as “on the one hand solipsistic and subjective and on the other hand almost anomalously social and political... a vacillation between ideological extremes of personal liberty and social likeness.”²³⁵ For Chénier (and Vigny) this plays out as the poet's creative Will colliding with a political machine that is intolerant of true creative genius. In the parts of *Stello* which deal with Gilbert and Chatterton, we see how the State crushes the poet's spirit, driving him to misery and suicide, respectively. In the case of Chénier, meanwhile, the oppressive regime is ever more active, taking a direct

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 654.

²³⁵ Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001), p. 14.

interest in its most eloquent of malcontents and thusly annihilating him, as an enemy of the human species.

Conclusion

If *Stello* is not the French historical novel *par excellence*, as some have argued, it is at least an important, pioneering work in the historical memory of the French Revolution. Where prior historical novels (including *Cinq Mars*) looked to the more distant national past for inspiration, Vigny boldly turns his energies to the event which founded the modern nation, while it was still fresh in the minds of many of his contemporaries. Not simply an historical fiction, however, Vigny settles his artistic attention upon a brief, chaotic, and tragic moment during the Revolution, yet he does so not for its own sake, but as a template for the establishment of an idea, of a national myth, that of the poet as martyr, but specifically as a martyr of the Revolution. *Stello* is therefore a philosophical novel before anything else, which is to say, Vigny's foremost concern is to elaborate this conception, in literary and when necessary, historical terms. The central idea, like in *Oberman* and *René*, is to show a certain type of psychological despair through the experiences of a young man—in this case a poet—as reflected in his life's tragic end. Where *Stello* differs from all the other works we have discussed is less in its philosophical theme, which is not all too different from those other texts, but more in the way that theme is framed within its historical setting.

By placing the poet archetype in revolutionary France—and by choosing André Chénier, whose execution is directly related to his intellectual qualities as a poet—Vigny recognizes death as the prevailing motif and enduring legacy of the revolutionary state and its servants; Chénier is forever linked to his guillotine, like Chatterton to his vial of poison and Gilbert to his key.²³⁶ More generally, the Revolution as a Romantic myth is bound up

²³⁶ Vigny, *Stello*, p. 664.

not so much with any set of principles, but with a systematized politics of *ressentiment*, with mass persecution of political opponents and civil conflict, terror and execution. In nearly all the texts discussed in this chapter, revolutionary violence—or its haunting specter—is at least implied as a main cause of trauma for individuals and for the people writ large. The prison cell is emblematic of the times, at least in these fictions, because what awaits after is impossible to recount in first person narration, yet known by all, and is therefore taken for granted. Vigny breaks from this convention by recreating Chénier’s execution in great detail, in one of *Stello*’s most beautifully written—and chillingly despondent—passages, where Le Docteur Noir recalls the young poet’s final moments:

Aux cris tumultueux, aux jurements, aux longues vociférations, succédèrent des murmures plaintifs qui semblaient un sinistre adieu, de lentes et rares exclamations dont les notes prolongées, bases et descendantes, exprimaient l’abandon de la résistance et gémissaient sur leur faiblesse. La Nation, humiliée, ployait le dos et roulait par troupeaux entre une fausse statue, une Liberté qui n’était que l’image d’une image, et un réel échafaud teint de son meilleur sang.²³⁷

The depiction of Chénier’s execution serves as an unequivocal indictment of the people; having already vilified the Revolution’s leaders, responsibility is now dispersed among the nation, those willing participants—by consent or silence—in the terror: “Ceux qui se pressaient voulaient voir ou voulaient s’enfuir. Nul ne voulait rien empêcher. Les bourreaux saisirent le moment. La mer était calme, et leur hideuse barque arriva à bon port. La guillotine leva son bras.”²³⁸ Vigny is clear in his view that each citizen has become an executioner, and therefore bears some responsibility not only for the poet’s death, but for all those who perished under the Terror. This part of *Stello* should of course be read as a

²³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 636.

²³⁸ *Ibid*.

critique of democracy, but it also broaches the question of guilt, which we shall explore in greater depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Who Killed Louis XVI? Narrative Representations of the Regicides in Ballanche's *l'Homme sans nom* and Balzac's *Un épisode sous la Terreur*

Ils disent que ce n'est rien, qu'on ne souffre pas, que c'est une fin douce, que la mort de cette façon est bien simplifiée.

-Victor Hugo, *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné*

Introduction

As one of his first (and last) acts as king before Napoleon's brief hundred day return from exile, in early 1815, Louis XVIII had the remains of his Bourbon predecessor exhumed from La Madeleine—where his corpse had been hastily buried in 1793—and on 21 January, reinterred alongside his royal forebears at the Basilica of Saint-Denis. This second funeral spared few expenses in its grandeur; the perfunctory burial of *citoyen* Capet in 1793 was starkly contrasted with the national ceremony in 1815. Chateaubriand, who many years later would recall “la pompe funèbre du 21 janvier” in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (he was present for both the exhumation and reburial) remarked somewhat ambivalently that although it was right for the restored monarchy to honor Louis XVI, such conduct should have been moderated, lest the new king forget that it was his subjects who willed the end of the Bourbon dynasty; only the grace and equanimity of a king instructed by divine providence could maintain its resurrection:

Dans ces demeures souterraines où dormaient ces rois et ces princes anéantis, Louis XVI se trouvera seul! ... Comment tant de morts se sont-ils levés? Pourquoi Saint-Denis est-il désert? Demandons plutôt pourquoi son toit est rétabli, pourquoi son autel est debout? Quelle main a reconstruit la voûte de ces caveaux, et préparé ces

tombeaux vides? La main de ce même homme qui était assis sur le trône des Bourbons. Ô Providence! il croyait préparer des sépulcres à sa race, et il ne faisait que bâtir le tombeau de Louis XVI.²³⁹

Nevertheless 21 January, the date of the king's execution in 1793, became an official day of mourning under the Restoration, as decreed by Louis XVIII in 1816. This royal order outlined much of the ceremonial and commemorative minutiae, which included a plan to erect the *chapelle expiatoire* (completed in 1826) on the site of the king's first burial at the Madeleine cemetery, as well as annual readings from Louis XVI's last will and testament, in lieu of a sermon. According to David Jordan, this was all done with the hope that 21 January would eventually take on a more profound, even religious significance; that the crypt of Saint-Denis would itself become a place of annual pilgrimage for the faithful.²⁴⁰ Although memorial services persisted until the end of the Restoration, they only clarified how France would memorialize one party to the regicide; the martyred king was to be venerated, but how would national memory treat those men whose words and actions ended the lives of Louis XVI and his family? What was to be of the regicides?

Accounts of the regicide written during the Restoration were rarely neutral, almost always politically charged, and typically portrayed Louis XVI as either a tyrant—the temporal head of a tyrannical institution—or as the victim of terrorist usurpers, a martyr for the sacred cause of throne and altar. The regicides, in contrast, were discussed in a far more negative, vague and illusory language, at times almost as abstractions or ideals. We can infer that the act of regicide was met by many with a degree of shock and abhorrence, while the regicide himself was perhaps a more elusive, taboo subject. A sort of descriptive vernacular

²³⁹ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe Tome II*, (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1998), p. 609-12. See also: Philip Mansel, *Paris Between Empires 1814-1852: Monarchy and Revolution*, (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 65; Jean-Clément Martin, *L'exécution du roi: 21 janvier 1793*, (Paris: Perrin, 2021), p. 338.

²⁴⁰ David Jordan *The King's trial: Louis XVI vs. the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) p. 227.

developed (during the Restoration, at least, out of some political expediency) wherein the regicides came to represent excess and radicalism, in contrast to Bourbon moderation and virtue. This contrast is exemplified in Charles Nodier's 1816 poem *Le Vingt-un janvier, ou une heure de Louis-Seize dans la tour du Temple*:

Et toi, dont l'âme atroce avait forgé ses fers,
Toi, ce monstre d'horreur qu'ont vomi les enfers,
Inique Robespierre, achève ton ouvrage ;
Dans ce dernier instant, cours assouvir ta rage,
Insulter à Louis dans son dernier soupir !
Te baigner dans son sang, t'y baigner à loisir !
Dans le sein des forfaits, cours réchauffer ta gloire ;
Cours! ... La France à jamais maudira ta mémoire.
Les temps sont arrivés où le sang d'un bon Roi
Va fumer sous les coups d'une homicide loi.²⁴¹

Nodier's verse, despite its rather obvious partisan timbre, gives some idea of the monarchy's hopes for how the nation would memorialize Louis XVI (and the regicides). By framing the text's subject within a paradigm of cosmic struggle between good and evil, one is left with the memory of a benevolent, saintly king who, when juxtaposed with his barbaric executioners bathing in his blood, imbues the poem with the sense of a providential, higher purpose. This, in any case, is certainly how the royalist Nodier intended it to be interpreted. Published under a pseudonym and soon forgotten, Nodier's poem is a paradigmatic, essentialized example of the regime-sanctioned view of both the king and regicides. Yet we might say that it was in reaction to this sort of mundane, theoretically exiguous archetype

²⁴¹ Nodier, *Le Vingt-un Janvier ou une heure de Louis-Seize dans la tour du Temple*, (Paris: J.G. Dentu, 1822), pp. 14-15.

that emerged an eagerness to explore, to represent the regicide, beyond such politically convenient clichés.

Although regicides were officially excluded from most aspects of political life during the Restoration, this was by no means a comprehensive, rigidly enforced policy. While many—Jacques-Louis David perhaps most famously—sought exile in Belgium, others who cast votes in favor of the king’s execution remained, to varying degrees, active in French social and even political spheres. Abbé Henri Grégoire, for example, was allowed for a time to run for elected office, until international outrage compelled the king to nullify his electoral success. Nevertheless, Grégoire remained an active voice in French politics until his death in 1831. All this is to say, the regicide question proved a rather more complicated problem than could be solved simply by disenfranchisement, ostracism, or even exile. If the Restoration government was serious about reunifying the fractured nation, it was imperative that it not descend into the politics of reaction.

The complicated political and social nature of regicides did, however, make it an intriguing, yet challenging, literary subject. For this was a person whose legacy in the decades after the Revolution was shaped largely in accordance with the interests of the regimes; first they were heralded as paragons of a virtuous republican ideal, then regarded with ambivalence under the Empire, and condemned as great sinners after the monarchy’s restoration. The precarious life of the regicides in postrevolutionary French society is representative of a broader national struggle to make sense of the Revolution, a project which took place not only in decrees and ceremonies, but also in the period’s writings. The regicide is an interesting, and certainly distinct example of the postrevolutionary trauma we began to explore in the previous chapter, and while this historical figure has almost nothing in common with René or Ourika—and is a perfect opposite of Vigny’s Chénier—the regicide as a literary type shares important characteristics with each of them. It is my hope to highlight these thematic similarities in the following chapter, by focusing on two fictions which illuminate the regicide—short works that appear at opposite ends of the

Restoration—and create two disparate, yet essentially related images of the regicide: *L'Homme sans nom* (1820) by Pierre-Simon Ballanche, and Balzac's *Un épisode sous la Terreur* (1829). These texts, I argue, are thematically linked by their careful, nuanced treatment of the regicide, who appears in the former as an unnamed, repentant, and traumatized *conventionnel*, and in the latter as the *bourreau* Charles-Henri Sanson, a man unsure of his guilt in the king's execution, yet burdened by it nevertheless.

Ballanche was certainly not the first French writer to broach the subject of the regicides, nor was Balzac the last; Germaine de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, and Joseph de Maistre (to name just a few) had all written about those responsible for the king's execution, though not, like Ballanche and Balzac, as the principal subject of a literary fiction. First, one might ask why it is important to single out these fictional representations? Rarely did any of this period's writers venture to examine, as do Balzac and Ballanche, the regicides with such attention to their peculiar psychological and social conditions, to study them first as human specimens, then to ask: what might have compelled them to such actions, and how have those actions altered their personalities? What, then, is remarkable about these two works? In a word: intimacy. *Conventionnel* and *bourreau* are not treated as caricatured evil, nor are their characters reduced to hackneyed tropes; rather, both authors allow their characters to explore their own conceptions of guilt, of atonement, which are then contrasted with society's notions of them. This freedom of thought and voice invites the reader to view the regicide not simply as an historical actor subject to the whims of the moment's oversimplified, partisan sympathies, but as a moral agent of sorts and importantly, as an individual.

Pierre-Simon Ballanche: Revolution and the Genesis of L'Homme sans nom

As was true for many of his contemporaries, Pierre-Simon Ballanche's life was greatly impacted, one might say scarred, by the Revolution. His experience as a teenager in Lyon

during the violent two-month siege and its aftermath loomed over his career as a writer and thinker. Lyon thereafter became *la ville sans nom*, stripped of its identity like the nameless regicide Ballanche would imagine some years later in *L'Homme sans nom*. Having endured what he did, it should come without much surprise that the Revolution appears as a critical theme in his works. Much of his philosophy is formed around the general premise that 1789 inaugurated the beginning of a new world, and that institutions—and the nation—must either adapt to this fact and evolve or remain obstinate in the face of progress and perish. The rapid changes brought about by the Revolution were, according to Ballanche, emblematic of a recurring historical dialectic: “Lutte donc, lutte effroyable du principe stationnaire et du principe progressif. Partout où la lutte cesse, il y a stagnation, civilisation pétrifiée.”²⁴² And while it is clear Ballanche preferred that society adapt to a changing world, he also undoubtedly recognized that in some cases it was inevitable that certain institutions must be left to succumb to the march of progress. So too was he partial to an explanation of the Revolution as an event which bore the marks of greater historical cause; while the Terror was an affront to many of the traditions which he held dear, Ballanche nevertheless understood even these gravest of excesses as footsteps in synchronized march with an inalterable cosmic design. Yet all his writings, to whatever universal axioms they may have aspired, were composed, according to Arthur McCalla, as an attempt to explain the troubling events of the Revolution.²⁴³ What is more, encoded in this philosophy of history one might observe, as Paul Bénichou does, an inextricable link between a providential historicism and the poetics of a certain iteration of counter-revolution. Ballanche has a clear vision of the commensal relationship which exists between poetic (and artistic) progress—possessed by the divine, driven by providence—and historical progress, in which the profane claims dominion, and where human works bear their own fruits, whatever the

²⁴² Pierre-Simon Ballanche, *Réflexions diverses*, in *Œuvres de Ballanche*, 6 vols. (Paris: Bureau de l'Encyclopédie des connaissances utiles, 1833), 4, p. 392.

²⁴³ Arthur McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy: The Philosophy of History of Pierre-Simon Ballanche*, (Boston: Brill, 1998), p. 4.

consequences. As Bénichou explains, Ballanche was a member of an ideological school of post-revolutionary “theosophists” whose ideas attempted to “greffe[r] sur le tronc chrétien une littérature de synthèse religieuse, de progrès humain et de rédemption universelle, animée par une foi illimitée dans le destin de l’homme au sein du monde.”²⁴⁴ Ballanche holds a view not unlike that of Chateaubriand in *Génie du Christianisme* and *Les Martyrs*, namely that of poetry as a means of divine revelation. And while Ballanche was not himself a poet—at least, not in a conventional sense—this does not preclude a reading of his works as possessive of a distinct sort of *poetics*. This is of course true with regard to the author’s grandiloquent romantic style, although it is Ballanche’s heterodox philosophy of history that makes his work so fascinating, and to which Bénichou is probably referring when he thinks of Ballanche as a poet. At times cloaked in the language of reaction, sometimes in that of liberal “progress”, Ballanche seems to be standing on the precipice of some ideology—of Romanticism, Catholic traditionalism, Enlightenment philosophy—ready to jump; he never does. The beguiling language of his writings might easily present a challenge to the nescient reader, how he so readily abandons convention and orthodoxy, employing familiar ideas in radically unfamiliar contexts and fashioning a poetics of history whose explanations of cause and effect are linguistically familiar, yet ideologically iconoclastic.

Despite its many idiosyncrasies, Ballanche’s work remains within a broad school of ostensible counterrevolutionary thought.²⁴⁵ Yet among this patchwork of Catholic traditionalists—whose views ranged from Chateaubriand’s mediation between tradition and progress, to de Maistre’s ultramontanism—Ballanche appears often as a peripheral voice; this is especially true of his work written during the Restoration, which includes *L’Homme sans nom*. His willingness in these texts to complicate the ethos of postrevolutionary French traditionalism puts him frequently at odds with many of the most prominent counterrevolutionary thinkers. As McCalla explains, although Ballanche remained more or

²⁴⁴ Bénichou, *Romantismes français I: Le sacre de l’écrivain; Le temps des prophètes*, p. 156.

²⁴⁵ Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et Terreur*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 487-527.

less devoted to a traditionalist cause, he gradually came to “accept that a return to absolutism was impossible and that some sort of mediation between the old and new ideas was necessary.”²⁴⁶ This, as McCalla notes, coincided with Louis XVIII’s endorsement of the Constitutional Charter in 1814; while *antimodernes* like de Maistre and Bonald opposed *in toto* any such reforms which would further obscure the *Ancien Régime* absolutist ideal to which they hoped to return, Ballanche observed in such compromises an historical dialectic which affirmed divine providence, understanding reasonable reforms not as anathema, but, in an almost Hegelian manner, as indisputable proof that providence functioned as both restorative and progressive.²⁴⁷

Although he remained friendly with a number of moderate and liberal thinkers—including many within the coterie of the salonnière Juliette Récamier—Ballanche found that his ideas provoked criticism across ideological divides. Those on the right (de Maistre, Bonald), for example, treated Ballanche’s tacit endorsement of progress as one which was largely at odds with their own unwavering conservatism. His Catholic legitimist views, meanwhile, alienated many liberals and moderates who might have otherwise admired his work. Thus, Ballanche became something of an ideological leper, despite his intention of reconciling these opposing factions.²⁴⁸ He admits as much, referring to himself repeatedly—and perhaps somewhat proudly—as “ce Janus d’une contre-révolution progressiste.”²⁴⁹ One should not, however, misinterpret this willingness to challenge ideological orthodoxy as contrarianism for its own sake. On the contrary, Ballanche hoped that his writing would

²⁴⁶ McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy*, p. 75.

²⁴⁷ See: Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2016). Compagnon argues that much like Chateaubriand, Ballanche observes the causes of the Revolution throughout the centuries leading up to 1789: “[il] lit l’histoire du royaume et perçoit la décadence de la vieille France dans la très longue durée.”, p. 96-7.

²⁴⁸ Michael Reardon, “Pierre Ballanche as French Traditionalist”, *Catholic Historical Review*, 53 (1968), pp. 573-99). Reardon argues that Ballanche attempted to reconcile opposed factions for largely selfish reasons. If there is any veracity to Reardon’s thesis, it is that Ballanche desperately sought to avoid another violent revolution. Consequently, that his views in this regard may have also served personal interest is a point which few scholars have considered.

²⁴⁹ Bénichou, *Romantismes français I: Le sacre de l’écrivain; Le temps des prophètes*, p. 158.

highlight the potential common ground which could exist between clashing factions. Initially met with disapproval from Chateaubriand, Ballanche decided against publishing *L'Homme sans nom*, after its completion in late 1819. However, in the aftermath of the Duc de Berry's assassination in February 1820, fear that an ultraroyalist reaction would thrust the nation once more into violent civil war compelled Ballanche to publish the work.²⁵⁰

'Le Régicide' Speaks

L'Homme sans nom is written in the form of the purportedly authentic memoirs of a man we know only as *le Régicide*. It is through his candidly intimate narration, styled as a confessional, that *le Régicide* is able to tell his story, while through this story Ballanche elaborates his palingenetic philosophy of history.²⁵¹ In this sense, then, *le Régicide* is a complex of ideas, yet he is also a literary character—a challenging study of a deeply controversial individual, who is given a voice of his own, but no identity beyond his crime. The work's title is thus somewhat misleading, for although the man around whom *L'Homme sans nom* is centered does not have a name he does, in a somewhat ironic twist on *noblesse oblige*, have a title. And with this comes the imperative that he uphold the nobility of his title, to live in solitude, and tell his story. We first encounter him sometime in August 1814, when an unnamed traveler comes upon “la maison du Régicide” while passing through a hamlet in Italy, “au pied des Alpes.”²⁵² After some investigation, he meets the man called *le*

²⁵⁰ McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy*, p. 77-8.

²⁵¹ Ballanche's use of *palingénésie* corresponds roughly to 'rebirth' or 'regeneration'; he borrowed the term from the eighteenth-century naturalist philosopher Charles Bonnet, whose *Palingénésie Philosophique* (1769) uses Christian theological premises to explain the author's teleological view of natural history. Ballanche was influenced by Bonnet's palingenetic philosophy, applying it instead to human history in his own work. See: Arthur McCalla, 'Palingénésie philosophique to palingénésie sociale: from a scientific ideology to a historical ideology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55 (1994), pp. 421-39).

²⁵² The setting is possibly one of the text's many veiled references to Rousseau. Like other traditionalist romantics, Ballanche had a complicated relationship with the Genevan thinker, thoroughly rejecting most of his political ideas, but drawn to his sentimentalism.

Régicide, who proceeds to recount the acquisition of his name. To begin, *le Régicide* explains, “Non seulement j’ai voulu que l’on m’appelât ainsi, mais même j’ai voulu que l’on ne pût pas m’appeler autrement.”²⁵³ Not only must the *Régicide* wear his crime as a title, but his very lineage needs be replaced by one whose filial privilege, whatever it might have been, becomes that of Iscariot: “Je suis devenu le fils de mon crime, l’enfant de la réprobation.”²⁵⁴ Indeed, such a crime as executing one’s sovereign proscribes the guilty from nearly all the privileges of society; “le Régicide, n’est-il pas un pestiféré du monde social, une sorte de lépreux condamné à la solitude et à l’opprobre?”²⁵⁵ The answer to this rhetorical question is of course, *yes*; his punishment places *le Régicide* just close enough to society that he can sense its existence, but his crimes preclude any meaningful reintegration. As an inversion of the legal precedent once used against enemies of the Revolution—and one which was considered for Louis XVI—it is the *Régicide* who is now the exile, in a world at least somewhat restored to its prerevolutionary state; he is now the enemy of civilization, *hostis humani generis*, though the consequence of his actions is not death, but ostracism and solitude.

Although the work profiles *le Régicide* in such a way that it reads as a sort of faux memoir entrenched in Rousseauvian sentimentalism, Ballanche clearly projects his own idealized vision of a repentant revolutionary upon his subject, alluding to a problematic view of patriotism much like in Chateaubriand’s *René*. Somewhat unsure of his actual guilt in the King’s execution, *le Régicide* serves as a vehicle for the author’s philosophy of history, his actions propelling the Revolution forward as an instrument of providence. He is however also a man, and is therefore subject to the force of *expiation*, which demands that he account for his crime. Here arises a contradiction in the work’s narrator, between his acceptance of guilt, and the recognition of an imperious providence which guides the course of history.

²⁵³ Pierre-Simon Ballanche, *L’Homme sans nom*, in *Œuvres de Ballanche*, 6 vols. (Paris: Bureau de l’Encyclopédie des connaissances utiles, 1833), 3, p. 178.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 178-9.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 179.

How is it possible that *le Régicide* can express guilt and remorse while acknowledging the presence of that greater force (providence), which precludes the existence of such requisite freedoms from which guilt necessarily proceeds? Ballanche seems unwittingly to bring into question the very existence of free will, which he resolves by categorically inferring an ephemeral sort of demonic possession. *Le Régicide* was overcome, possessed by *something*, as he explains,

Je n'avais pas le courage de résister au torrent des circonstances, comment n'eus-je pas plutôt une autre sorte de lâcheté, celle de fuir?... je trouv[ais] dans l'intimité de ma conscience quelque force ignorée de moi-même; je croyais que l'impossibilité de faire le mal, impossibilité qui me semblait être le lien de toutes mes facultés, suffirait pour me garantir de succomber, pour m'empêcher de céder en présence d'un danger même le plus imminent.”²⁵⁶

Does this imply that he believe himself simply a tool of providence? It seems unlikely that Ballanche intends to deprive his *Régicide* of any agency. Rather, *le Régicide*, overtaken by *amour-propre* and beguiled by *philosophie*, casts his vote of *arrêt de mort* amidst a torrent of alien emotion. A perverse, unsettling joy overwhelms him in this moment, as he explains in perhaps the most revealing passage of the narrative, which is quoted here in its entirety:

Déjà plusieurs votes avaient été émis, et ces votes divers me faisaient passer par toutes les incertitudes les plus cruelles, par toutes les alternatives de l'abattement et de la douleur. Je les notais avec angoisse dans ma mémoire. Celui dont un sort cruel appela le nom immédiatement avant le mien prononça d'une voix assurée l'arrêt de mort. Des murmures d'une exécration l'accompagnèrent lorsqu'il

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 195.

descendit de la tribune; des murmures de menace me suivirent lorsque je me présentai pour y monter. J'y arrive en frémissant. Je sentis comme mille poignards à-la-fois tous les yeux, qui furent spontanément fixés sur les miens: cette multitude de regards inquiets et inexorables ainsi concentrés exercèrent aussitôt sur mon âme une puissance surnaturelle de trouble et de fascination que je ne puis expliquer. Autour de moi rien ne m'encourageait, et tout au contraire m'épouvantait. Aucun cœur ne semblait vouloir me répondre. Je me trouvais seul comme un homme suspendu sur le penchant d'un abyme, et privé de tout secours. Livré à l'abandon le plus absolu, je ne sais quel attrait du crime, je ne sais quel goût du remords et du désespoir vint saisir avec des bras de fer une pauvre créature délaissée. Eh Dieu! Je crois qu'en ce moment funeste une parole inconnue, une parole qui n'était pas la mienne, vint se placer sur mes lèvres iniques. Arraché de ma propre conscience, perdu dans la confusion de mes idées et de mes sentiments, j'étais un être sans moralité. Ma bouche, devenue le plus vil instrument, avait à mon insu prononcé l'arrêt de mort. Que ne m'est-il permis d'en douter! Mais je l'ai entendu aussi distinctement que le vote de celui qui m'avait précédé; je l'ai entendu comme une voix étrangère qui mentait à ma pensée, qui immolait ce que j'avais de plus cher en moi. D'ailleurs n'ai-je pas vu, malgré tout le désordre de mes sens, cette joie atroce et convulsive, ce mépris insultant, qui se manifestèrent sitôt qu'on eut acquis une voix sur laquelle on ne comptait point?²⁵⁷

This passage, a stirringly honest moment of introspection, also offers a contrast between the Revolution's primary actors. On the one hand, the regicidal mob, with whom *le Régicide* includes himself, debased by a hubris which is emboldened by delusions of enlightenment. On the other there is the deposed monarch who lingers in *le Régicide's* memory; never once

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 202-3.

mentioned in the above reflection, Louis XVI looms implicitly over his killer as an innocent victim of fevered rage, his virtue instantiating expiation. We should not ignore the obvious parallel here to Christ's condemnation, as Ballanche certainly recognizes the similarity;²⁵⁸ "Le roi a racheté la France comme Jésus-Christ a racheté le genre humain."²⁵⁹ Nowhere is this more evident than in Louis' denouement, as "le divin Représentant de la nature humaine"; after enduring humiliation and dehumanization, the deposed king appears "devant le peuple avec une couronne d'épines et un sceptre de roseau dans la main."²⁶⁰ Thus it is the King's suffering—not that of *le Régicide*—which is the primary source of expiation within the text's historical setting. Louis' ordeal immediately elevates his status to that of redeemer of the French people; "L'innocence de Louis XVI avait préservé la royauté de toute atteinte contagieuse et mortelle. Le sang d'une victime pure ne souille point."²⁶¹ But then what function, if any, is served by the atonement of his many persecutors? If the king's execution comes to represent for *le Régicide* (and Ballanche) a source of renewal for the French people, what need is there for the guilty to atone? More specifically, what is *le Régicide's* own expiatory function, as a matter which pertains to the author's palingenetic historiography?

It is evident that this exiled, ostracized man atones through reliving his trauma in perpetuity; unlike Louis XVI, who suffers once, *le Régicide* must carry the insignia of his crime throughout life. Forever linked by 21 January, king and regicide are two iterations of Ballanche's expiatory paradigm, yet unlike the king, who represents for Ballanche a Christlike symbol of redemption for the French people—whose humiliation and execution are ultimately the ordeal which leads to his beatification—*le Régicide*, by his own account, must endure protracted suffering in order to serve the most basic mechanism of providence.

²⁵⁸ As McCalla explains, "Ballanche...insists on a sacrificial reading of the gospel text that makes Christ's death the archetypal sacrificial death, which all other sacrificial deaths foreshadow or recall." See: McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy*, p. 54.

²⁵⁹ Ballanche, *L'Homme sans nom*, p. 264.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p 207.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 236.

Awaiting some overt sign from the heavens, he finds instead that absolution shall come only with earnest atonement:

Je croyais sentir en moi que les nuées devaient s'ouvrir, et qu'un envoyé de Dieu arriverait pour soustraire le juste à la mort de l'échafaud, pour épargner à mon infortunée patrie le plus grand des attentats et les châtements qui en sont la suite, pour m'affranchir, moi misérable ver de terre, qui ne mérite que d'être foulé aux pieds, pour m'affranchir d'un remords qui était trop étranger à ma nature, et que je ne pouvais supporter. Il me semblait enfin que le juste eût pu mieux périr si j'eusse moins souffert de mon crime.²⁶²

What is perhaps most interesting about *le Régicide*'s comprehension of providence is how he willingly resigns himself to its force. Far from a passive observer or thoughtless drone upon which some celestial force exercises its might, he is cognizant of his transgressions, and earnest in his atonement. This sort of freedom is a surprising contrast to *le Régicide*'s account of his inability to exercise his will when deciding the king's fate; although his exile is explained as a punitive measure, there is never any doubt that he views it as a duty. The story we are told is a testament to humanity's fall; apologetics disguised as apology. It is a reminder that all still live with original sin, while *le Régicide* himself is Ballanche's monument to the ubiquitous palingenetic force which rescues from the abyss even the most egregious of transgressors, governing humanity's odyssey through space and time. Becoming *le Régicide*, then, is perhaps less of a punishment than it might seem. It is, rather, a means of procuring divine instruction—*procurare auspicia*—in order to serve providence; in an important sense *le Régicide* decrypts for subsequent generations the sublime logos, simply by recalling his

²⁶² *Ibid*, p. 223.

revolutionary trauma to any who choose to listen. He serves this end as both a monument to historical folly, and ultimately as a chronicler of historical providence:

Dieu jugera à propos de m'appeler en sa présence, pour que je reçoive mon jugement définitif; car, dès à présent... le supplice que j'éprouve est un avant-coureur de ce jugement redoutable... Cette maison doit être démolie pour couvrir ma fosse de ses débris; et, durant au moins une génération, les hommes, en voyant ces ruines, diront: 'Ce tas de pierres fut la maison qu'habita le Régicide.'²⁶³

A Regicidal Theosophy of History

In the final chapter of *L'Homme sans nom*, “Notes trouvées dans la maison du Régicide après sa mort”, *le Régicide* provides a more coherent—and more literary—explication of his involvement in the Revolution. If his oral account was a sentimental confession, it is in this written account that the regicide reemerges as a sort of historian. The chapter, which Ballanche passes off, like Nodier does in *Thérèse Auberrt*, as a posthumous “found” manuscript, forms the work’s synthesis of past and future between which the author attempts to mediate. Here one discovers, as Bénichou explains, “la conscience d’une mission...d’enseigner la filiation des temps, et le lien qui unit les anciennes formes du sacré aux lois nouvelles de la communauté humaine.”²⁶⁴ Ballanche’s idea of historical progress, to which Bénichou alludes, has thus far materialized largely in relation to *le Régicide* as a personal, lived experience. In his notes, however, progress—and regression, its antithesis—becomes a chief means by which to explain historical cause and effect. If providence is the metaphysical force which propels the nation forward, and progress is its temporal

²⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 244.

²⁶⁴ Bénichou, *Romantismes français I: Le sacré de l'écrivain; Le temps des prophètes*, p. 158.

manifestation, then any action which impedes the progression of history is worthy of contempt for its retrograde, antisocial nature.

The French Revolution, according to Ballanche's theory, was above all an affront to progress—a regression in absolute terms to an age of pre-Christian savagery; this is particularly true with respect to Louis XVI's execution.²⁶⁵ As Mona Ozouf explains, "l'image du régicide se tient au centre de cette vision affligée du monde... il y a chez Ballanche la tentation de faire de la mort du roi, qui fut la scène primitive de son [*le Régicide*'s] existence, la scène primitive de l'humanité."²⁶⁶ This is clear, he believes, if we are attentive to the egregious misuses of otherwise venerable societal ideals. Liberty, reform, equality, are not ignoble principles *per se*, yet they become instruments of the wicked once wielded by knavish iconoclasts, whose destructive contempt for France's ancient, sacred institutions necessarily places the revolutionaries in opposition to both Christendom and their own professed values. This is one of Ballanche's most clever rhetorical idiosyncrasies, to present Louis XVI as a great reformist who, far from grasping at the last vestiges of a dying monarchy, looks toward the future; he is a man of his century, of the ideas of his time, not those of some bygone era. The king's ambitions, which *le Régicide* argues were almost singularly concentrated on improving the lives of all his subjects, were held back in the first place by a floundering nobility and ultimately undone by a rabble intoxicated by resentment.²⁶⁷

Further expounding upon this thesis, *le Régicide* explains that an otherwise good philosophy, which instructed princes on the realization of their patriarchal obligation—here he refers specifically to Fénelon's *Télémaque*—had precisely the opposite effect when read by the French people, specifically the *philosophes*:

²⁶⁵ McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy*, p. 99-100.

²⁶⁶ Mona Ozouf, 'Ballanche: "L'Idée et l'image du régicide"', *Le Débat* 39 (1986), p. 3.

²⁶⁷ Ballanche, *L'Homme sans nom*, p. 290.

Ce livre (*Télémaque*) admirable qui n'était destiné qu'à instruire les rois, a été adopté par les peuples. Le sentiment nouveau... a eu ses apôtres intolérants, ses aveugles fanatiques, ses impatients propagateurs. Il en résulté toutes les exagérations de nos philosophes du dix-huitième siècle. Il en résulté la révolution.²⁶⁸

Fénelon's influence upon this succession of French monarchs highlights the potential benefit of progress and enlightenment, when instructed by providence. The Revolution, by this reasoning, was an aberration of that very same progress, a mirage which misled the masses into a false belief that providence could be usurped and repurposed. The result is a startling view that imagines demagogues who, believing themselves to be acting in a just manner, wield power no less arbitrarily. The consequence of this grand delusion in the short term, according to *le Régicide*, was a nation steeped in the blood of innocents, the needless execution of a compassionate king, and later, the return of an ancient form of despotism in the person of Napoleon. This notion of regression to a pre-Christian barbarism—for Christianity's antecedents are innately regressive and barbaric—appears throughout Ballanche's œuvre.

Whether (and to what extent) Louis XVI was an enlightened monarch as *le Régicide* describes him is of less importance to Ballanche than is proving that he was more enlightened than those who deposed him. *Le Régicide's* apologia would collapse at once, in other words, if the king were not depicted as at least relatively more representative of progress than his persecutors. McCalla summarizes this point well, explaining,

The execution of Louis XVI represents a regression to pre-Christian, and hence anti-social, customs. The regicide, therefore, was a tragic anachronism attributable

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 278.

to the Revolutionaries' rejection of providence. In fact, it was doubly anachronistic: generally so because kings no longer need to be killed when dynasties change, and particularly so because Louis' progressivism meant that there was no need for him to be deposed at all.²⁶⁹

McCalla concludes this assessment by pondering the truly confounding aspect of Ballanche's treatment of Louis XVI; "whether his death was an unnecessary anachronism, or a necessary expiatory sacrifice."²⁷⁰ Unlike Bénichou, whose reading of Ballanche maintains that he did not view Louis XVI as a harbinger of progress, but rather as a monument to a dying order, McCalla mediates between the extremes, claiming Ballanche understood regicide at this moment as excessive, but inevitable nonetheless.

Ballanche's philosophy of history was still undergoing revisions from 1818-20, and his conception of the Revolution within the bounds of this progressivist, providential view of the past had not yet been fully refined. To what extent does Ballanche develop this idea in *L'Homme sans nom*? The mimetic properties preclude the author's use of an idiom more suited to one of his philosophical essays, thus when *le Régicide* speaks (or writes), Ballanche's ideas are expressed in a more colloquial or "believable" language. As he makes clear in the *Avant-propos*, "J'ai voulu, dans ces Entretiens, donner à ma pensée une expression qui puisse être comprise par plus de lecteurs."²⁷¹ Take the following, where *le Régicide* explains why executing the king was such an affront to the law, both divine and temporal:

Louis XVI s'avancait aussi, bien avant la révolution, vers les idées constitutionnelles. Sous ce rapport, comme sous beaucoup d'autres, on sent qu'il n'était point en arrière de son siècle, qu'il partageait la maturité de la première

²⁶⁹ McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy*, p. 99.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁷¹ Ballanche, *Le Vieillard et le jeune homme*, in *Œuvres de Ballanche*, 6 vols. (Paris: Bureau de l'Encyclopédie des connaissances utiles, 1833), 3, p. 4.

nation du monde, du peuple destiné par la Providence à marcher à la tête de la civilisation européenne.²⁷²

This passage expresses the author's revisionist view of the king in the sentimental *langage* of *le Régicide*, which is also that of "les diverses classes de la société" for whom Ballanche claimed to have been writing.²⁷³ When such words as the ones above are presented as documentary fragments, the sense of viscerally emotional authenticity and importantly, of authority, are only intensified. This is the poetics of Pierre-Simon Ballanche; the poetics of a sentimentality for the past, while reconciling with the present, and offering a less abrasive path forward. If Ballanche is the architect of this grand historical supposition, then *le Régicide* is the philosopher-poet of expiation.

The unsettled debate concerning where Louis XVI fits in Ballanche's philosophy of history cannot, of course, be resolved by looking only at *L'Homme sans nom*. The text is not an exhaustive proof of the author's philosophy, nor is it intended as such. It is, however, comprehensive as far as its purpose allows: as a microcosmic study of the mind and heart of an epochal man, *le Régicide*. In this manner, Ballanche aspires to Dantean heights; he admires the Italian poet's "génie audacieux" which, similarly to his own (so he believes), inspires such an artist to "peindre son siècle." As he proclaims in the *dédicace* to the contemporaneously written *Essais de palingénésie sociale* (1820), "ainsi que le Dante, je veux visiter les lieux infrequentés de la foule, les lieux qu'habitent les intelligences, où est le berceau mystérieux de toutes les destinées humaines."²⁷⁴ Do we not hear echoes of the *Commedia* in *le Régicide*? As Dante rescued, for example, Pietro della Vigna from hell's ninth circle, from a traitor's posterity, do we not find in Ballanche's work a certain sympathy expressed for the exiled *Régicide*? This is one of *L'Homme sans nom*'s noteworthy

²⁷² Ballanche, *L'Homme sans nom*, p. 283.

²⁷³ Ballanche, *Le Vieillard et le jeune homme*, p. 4.

²⁷⁴ Ballanche, *Dédicace*, in *Œuvres de Ballanche*, 6 vols. (Paris: Bureau de l'Encyclopédie des connaissances utiles, 1833), 4, pp. 5-6.

achievements: restoring some humanity even to one who inhabits the darkest of history's recesses. By painting *le Régicide* as a remorseful, disillusioned outcast, Ballanche shows how revolutionary trauma is not restricted to one side or another, that it is a function of historical presence most of all. But can we therefore call *L'homme sans nom* a rehabilitative work? *Le Régicide* certainly expresses remorse and reflects on the morality of his actions, revealing a side of revolutionary violence not often seen in literature of the period. In the previous chapter we explored the effects of such trauma on the Revolution's victims, how events stripped them of both identity and purpose. Similarly, *le Régicide* finds himself isolated and defeated, with only his story to assuage the immense burden of his guilt. This story is of such great importance because it offers a perspective of the Revolution which, in other works, is vague and implied, but seldom examined. Ballanche's contribution to the revolutionary tapestry thus serves the important function of incorporating the perspective and experience of history's pariah into the collective memory of the Revolution. His work boldly reimagines this figure's place within the historical paradigm, while complicating the way we regard him and his ilk. In like manner, Balzac was to undertake a similar project some ten years later, in one of the earliest installments of *La Comédie humaine*, *Un épisode sous la Terreur*.

Balzac's Scene from the Terror

Although the French Revolution looms ethereally over the world of *La Comédie humaine*, it typically materializes in plot as a flashback, or as a means of instructing or reflecting upon the social and political thought and disposition of Balzac's characters.²⁷⁵ As was true of the France in which Balzac lived, the Revolution's enduring influence on the

²⁷⁵ See: Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular history and the novel in nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 195-232. Samuels adeptly describes Balzac's use of the spectacular in his early historical works, while identifying the author's use of flashback, as in *Adieu*, as bridge between diegetic past and present. More broadly, Samuels argues that *Adieu* represents a median genre between the historical romance, and the realist novel.

author's representation is elemental to the point where its presence might be taken at times for granted. In spite of this, Balzac rarely explores, in earnest, quotidian life during the Revolution. Along with *Les Chouans* (1829), Balzac also published in 1829 a *nouvelle*, *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, which boldly problematizes the relationship between the Revolution's participants and its victims, while bringing into question how such participation is defined. Balzac's text encourages us to ask: who is guilty of the Revolution's excesses? Or rather, how does one distinguish between a willing participant and dutiful functionary? If Ballanche implores us to consider the regicides in relation to their humanity, Balzac puts such a thesis to the test, by thrusting a similar figure into an inhospitable social milieu. *Un épisode sous la Terreur* is thus as much a morality play as it is an historical exploration in Balzacian realism. The story imagines, on the one hand, the experience of French clergy in hiding during one of the Revolution's most consequential (and for them, one of its darkest) moments, and on the other, a mysterious figure who, we learn only in the work's final scene—though surely this is hinted at throughout—is actually the king's executioner. The interaction between executioner and clergy rigorously challenges our conceptions of guilt; in this sense, then, we might say that the genesis of the *Comédie humaine* is to be found in such accounts of recent French history; in 1789, and indeed, in 1793.

La Comédie humaine is constructed around a certain theoretical interest in the historical; we see this fascination with history materialize in some of the *Comédie's* earliest works, which explore France's past, from Medieval Tours during the reign of Louis XI, up to the Chouan royalist uprising in Brittany some three centuries later. Balzac's interest in history at this early point in his career, inspired such works as *Les Chouans*, *Maître Cornélius* (1831), and *Les Proscrits* (1831). Over a decade later, in the *Avant-propos* to the *Comédie humaine* (1842), Balzac would explain in greater detail the persistent theoretical importance of historical engagement in literature, to which end Walter Scott's work was an enduring influence:

Walter Scott élevait donc à la valeur philosophique de l'histoire le roman, cette littérature qui, de siècle en siècle, incruste d'immortels diamants la couronne poétique des pays où se cultivent les lettres. Il y mettait l'esprit des anciens temps, il y réunissait à la fois le drame, le dialogue, le portrait, le paysage, la description; il y faisait entrer le merveilleux et le vrai, ces éléments de l'épopée, il y faisait coudoyer la poésie par la familiarité des plus humbles langages.²⁷⁶

If we take the author of the *Avant-propos* at his word, Scott's example inspired a generation of writers—as we have seen already with Alfred de Vigny's *Cinq Mars*—to take up the challenge of incorporating into their fictions the vivid hues of local and national history. The extent to which Scott continued to influence Balzac beyond these early historical works is the subject of persistent debate, but we can have little doubt that the *Avant-propos* is the author's earnest attempt to quantify his already immense corpus into a finite set of fundamental ideas. Still, Balzac provides us with only a general sense that the *Comédie* has some larger, more coherent purpose, which must be to record the author's study of human types according to the zoological methods implemented by the naturalist Buffon (one of his other principal influences, alongside Scott), and to classify each character, each *type*, living as they do on the streets of Paris, in the French countryside, in a distant past and the more familiar present.²⁷⁷ In other words, while human beings are a single species, this uniformity yields to a rich diversity when peoples are observed in particular milieux; ergo, Balzac's *types*.²⁷⁸ “Likeness” according to Balzac “is the basic principle”, Deborah Jenson explains,

²⁷⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *Avant-Propos*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981), 1, p. 10.

²⁷⁷ Andre Vanoncini “Balzac en deçà et au-delà des lois de l'histoire”, *L'Année Balzacienne* 15 (2014), pp. 87-101.

²⁷⁸ See: Allan Pasco, *Balzacian Montage: Configuring 'La Comédie Humaine'*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

while “environment [i]s the force of species differentiation.”²⁷⁹ This, in any case, gives some idea of what Balzac proposes to do, and how he causes his textual diversity somehow to coalesce. *Un épisode sous la Terreur* surely conforms to Jenson’s observation; by thrusting an otherwise familiar enough archetype—*le bourreau*—into a precarious conflict between duty and principle, Balzac complicates our understanding of the limits to one’s ostensible commitment to Revolution, while revealing a more nuanced tableau of Paris during the Terror.

It is generally accepted that *Un épisode sous la Terreur* was written originally as a preface to Sanson’s memoirs, the first volume of which was published by his son Henri—with Balzac’s consultation as editor (if not as its actual author)—sometime in 1829.²⁸⁰ Indeed, the introduction to Sanson’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la Révolution* (1831) is a slightly altered version of Balzac’s *nouvelle*, yet the text is credited to documents found among manuscripts belonging to the Abbé de Marolles, who appears in *Un épisode sous la Terreur* as the old priest.²⁸¹ It is therefore possible that this is Balzac’s source, or that he is the sole author of the story. Regardless of the work’s genesis, one imagines that Balzac found in Sanson’s story valuable material with which to broach the complicated new social landscape that emerged from, and during, the Revolution. The story begins in January 1793, though not with the spectacle of the regicide, but on the day after Louis XVI’s execution—a less eventful day in contrast to 21 January. But this is the author’s intention by commencing the drama on 22 January; once *terreur* exerts its force upon the nation, scenes such as the one Balzac describes become the norm. In this regard then, the story sets out from the first line

²⁷⁹ Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001), p. 150.

²⁸⁰ Honoré de Balzac, *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981), 8, pp. 1411-24. See also: Damien Zanone, *Écrire son temps: les mémoires en France de 1815 à 1848*, (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2006).

²⁸¹ While it is possible that the origin of the story is as Sanson claims, there is no settled consensus among scholars. Susan Bérard notes, however, that the question is “plus de curiosité que de véritable intérêt.” See Bérard’s *Histoire du texte*, in Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981), 8, pp. 1411-17.

with the implication that the regicide inaugurates a new state of exception, that the Revolution from this point on is decidedly unlike what it had been for the previous three years. Balzac thus emphasizes effects and is more interested in capturing the response to this event, rather than recreating the clichéd tableau, to which every account of the French Revolution devotes some exemplary passage. The king’s execution, much like *10 août* or the storming of the Bastille, is monumentalized in narrative histories and etched into the broader collective memory of the Revolution, standing as a critical, world-historical moment especially for those who witnessed and lived through it. But the reactions of those average people—the minor actors living in the background—are what Balzac aspires to recreate. Once the spectacle of the regicide has faded into the scenery, all of France, including the characters we are soon to encounter, are forced to confront a nation amidst a transformation more radical than most could have foreseen in 1789.

Innocuous though such a detail may appear to be, Balzac’s decision to begin a story about the Terror on *22 janvier* rather than, say, *22 Prairial an II* (the date typically associated with the commencement of formal, legal terror), reveals to us something of the author’s historical and aesthetic interests, to present to the reader an “anti-spectacle”; this is true both in the isolated case of *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, and in consideration of his broader canon.²⁸² The historical tableau, an opaque, almost gothic melodrama, effectively sets the tone for the work’s exploration of the psychological trauma caused by the regicide. This might explain why the author selects this precise moment as emblematic of Parisian life during the Terror, when the “Reign of Terror” is still some months in the future. Balzac constructs the story with less regard for a faithful chronology, where the terrorized—not their tormentors—define the period in terms of a deep trauma which commences

²⁸² See Jean-Clément Martin, *La Terreur, vérités et légendes*, (Paris: Perrin, 2017). According to Martin, a precise chronology of the Terror is exceptionally difficult to establish, other than the general acceptance that it ends with the death of Robespierre. Though even this, as Martin notes, is not indisputable, and is in fact contradicted by documentary evidence: “La première mention de ‘la Terreur’... ne se trouve qu’à la date du 5 août 1794... après l’exécution de Robespierre...” (p. 7).

immediately following the king's execution, one which persists throughout the rest of the Revolution, and lingers well into the nineteenth century. We recall the famous pronouncement by Mademoiselle de Chaulieu, who writes in the twelfth letter of *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1841), that “les effets les plus destructifs de la Révolution” were instigated by the regicide, an action which served as a catalyst for the nation's fracturing: “En coupant la tête à Louis XVI, la Révolution a coupé la tête à tous les pères de famille.”²⁸³ The effects to which Mme de Chaulieu refers are principally those of a socio-political nature, though the personal, psychological impact is inseparable from the abrupt social transformation which is implicit in the comparison of Louis XVI with a ‘père de famille.’

Balzac's principal task in *Un épisode sous la Terreur* therefore entails recreating a scene which captures the reaction to a spectacle—that of Louis XVI upon the scaffold—as well as the societal and personal impact of the regicide. Jean-Clément Martin succinctly explains these two aspects of the event—the spectacular and political—by framing the execution as a point of commencement for the despair which was to follow: “Outre le spectacle de l'échafaud, est-ce le choc provoqué par la décapitation du souverain, voire l'émotion des individus devant le passage de la “verticalité” (Dieu, le roi, les sujets) à l'“horizontalité” (la nation, les représentants, les citoyens), qui cause les désordres mentaux?”²⁸⁴ This is the very same perspective of the regicide and subsequent period expressed by Balzac; *Terreur* is defined most accurately not by a speech in the Convention, but by the people, those for whom, in this case, a state of terror becomes the norm on 22 January, 1793.

²⁸³ Balzac, *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 1, p. 242.

²⁸⁴ Jean-Clément Martin, *L'exécution du roi: 21 janvier 1793*, (Paris: Perrin, 2021), p. 333.

The Executioner's Guilt: Sanson in Context

Un épisode sous la Terreur is structured into three somewhat distinct scenes, the first two of which occur on the day following the deposed monarch's execution, while the events of the final scene take place on subsequent anniversaries of the King's death. The story follows Louis XVI's executioner, Charles-Henri Sanson, as he seeks out a group of Carmelites-in-hiding, in hopes of holding a memorial mass for the deceased monarch. Although Sanson's identity remains a mystery until the final moment, the story works gradually towards the reveal; he appears first as a figure in the shadows—presumed to be some agent of the Revolution—in pursuit of an old woman, one of the Carmelites. The woman seeks refuge in a bakery, where the proprietors meet her with some mixture of contempt and pity. Upon leaving the bakery which, we learn, she did not wander into by chance, but to retrieve communion wafers—the city is, evidently, rife with networks of defiance—the old woman notices that the same person has resumed stalking her. After following the woman home, her stalker reveals through his expressed intention to hold the mass that he poses no threat and is, at least ostensibly, a royalist fellow traveler.

When the visitor returns to the covert monastery for the mass, *terreur* has all but disappeared, supplanted by a monastic sanctity, which Balzac's description emphasizes; "Un grand crucifix d'ébène et d'ivoire" hangs from the wall; "quatre petits cierges fluets... jetaient une lueur pâle et mal réfléchi par le mur."²⁸⁵ The scene, one of pious serenity, provides a contrast to the world outside, where we encounter only symbols of the Revolution: we see the *bonnet rouge*; we hear *citoyen* used as the proper form of address; these two worlds are paradoxical. Contrast subsumes the mass scene, as it has much of the story; "La grandeur de l'action contrastait si fortement avec la pauvreté des choses, qu'il en résultait un sentiment d'effroi religieux... Tout était immense, mais petit; pauvre, mais

²⁸⁵ Balzac, *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, p. 444.

noble; profane et saint tout à la fois.”²⁸⁶ Indeed, even the building in which the Carmelites have found refuge cannot elude the precarious dualities so emblematic of the Revolution, as Sanson, perhaps in an unwitting projection of his own moral burden, explains to his hosts; “Vous êtes... dans une maison dont le propriétaire, Mucius Scævola, ce plâtrier qui habite le premier étage, est célèbre dans la section par son patriotisme ; mais il est secrètement attaché aux Bourbons.”²⁸⁷ The Revolution, in other words, has dressed principled men in the costume of contradiction, occasionally out of necessity, sometimes as a means of self-preservation. We might think of *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, like Tim Farrant does, as a story which derives its very essence from the Revolution’s messy contradictions, dealing with “the ambiguous realities behind appearance, the secret history, the blurring of boundaries which societies take as read.”²⁸⁸

While Sanson is clear that his purpose for visiting the Carmelites is to hold an expiatory mass for Louis XVI, it is evident also that he is seeking a confession—to be absolved of his sin—even if, in a somewhat bashful manner, he never quite admits to his confessor what trespasses he has committed. This is possibly a manifestation of Sanson’s uncertainty, which expresses the author’s own exploration of how guilt is perceived and defined, here as it relates to the executioner. Indeed, Balzac scrutinizes the hangman’s guilt similarly in other works; in the aptly-titled *El Verdugo* (1830), for example, a story set in a Spanish town under occupation by Napoleon’s forces, a rebellious family of the local nobility is given the option to preserve their lineage when, in a rather sadistic “compromise”, the French commanding officer agrees to spare their eldest son, Juanito, on the condition that he carry out the execution of his own family. In this case, Juanito is absolved of responsibility for killing his family, as he is simply a stand-in for the executioner: “Le bourreau était là en cas de refus de la part de Juanito” and later, “Le bourreau comprit, comme tout le monde, que Juanito avait

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 447.

²⁸⁸ Tim Farrant, *Balzac’s Shorter Fictions: Genesis and Genre*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 69.

accepté sa place pour un jour.”²⁸⁹ Still, much like Sanson, and Ballanche’s *Régicide*, the young Spanish noble must bear a millstone of his own, the burden of parricide which, as is true for both *le Régicide* and Sanson, becomes the defining characteristic of Juanito’s identity; he is now *El Verdugo*, a title he has earned and must therefore carry throughout life. The story ends, like *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, with an unresolved contradiction:

Malgré les respects dont il est entouré, malgré le titre d’*El Verdugo* (le Bourreau) que le roi d’Espagne a donné comme titre de noblesse au marquis de Léganès. Il est dévoré par le chagrin, il vit solitaire et se montre rarement. Accablé sous le fardeau de son admirable forfait, il semble attendre avec impatience que la naissance d’un second fils lui donne le droit de rejoindre les ombres qui l’accompagnent incessamment.²⁹⁰

As we observe with Juanito, who is thus burdened with the guilt of an act he did not willingly commit, so too does Sanson find himself aggrieved by a moral dilemma of indirect involvement. Sanson asks the old priest whether he believes “qu’une participation indirecte sera punie... Le soldat qui a été commandé pour former la haie est-il donc coupable?”; Marolles offers no response to this question, almost as though he ignores it.²⁹¹ But this is a question that Balzac hears clearly, and to which he replies in the affirmative. Sanson’s guilt is never decided in the text’s dialogue, but rather the question is further complicated by the priest’s horror, when he finally deduces that the unknown man is Sanson *le bourreau*. Although the final scene is ambiguous, offering no explicit moral resolution, it is clear that Sanson faces condemnation in the court of opinion, where, as one scholar has noted,

²⁸⁹ Balzac, *El Verdugo*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 10, p. 1141.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1143.

²⁹¹ Balzac, *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, p. 447.

“identity is inseparable from violence.”²⁹² Furthermore, as those titles forged by violent acts—regicide, executioner, parricide—are not themselves immutable and each is earned, we are reminded that there are no principles here, only circumstances; that is to say, one’s status in Balzac’s world is rarely definite, and never as simple as appearances might suggest.

Conclusion: Joseph de Maistre’s prism

The examples of both Juanito and Sanson highlight a complicated moral dilemma, which asks whether it is possible for an individual to be absolved of participation in a heinous act, when conducted under the aegis of an office or position (or indeed, under coercion). Ballanche alludes to this question when *le Régicide* attempts to rationalize his actions, invoking as a sort of defense the madness of crowds. Yet even Ballanche leaves some space for interpretation; *le Régicide* is of course guilty, but in the peculiar context, this guilt is far closer to one with moral, rather than corporeal implications; exile is not an imposed punishment, in other words, but a willing acceptance of providence. A third voice in this discourse, that of Joseph de Maistre, takes a more doctrinaire view, arguing that *le bourreau* is a complex of identities. He is a Janus-faced being, both man and instrument; his personal life is one that might appear familiar to us, and to which we might even relate. Conversely, his profession places him at a great distance from polite society; his very presence instills fear: “il tend sa main souillée de sang, et la justice y jette de loin quelques pièces d’or qu’il emporte à travers une double haie d’hommes écartés par l’horreur.”²⁹³ Yet once his work is complete, he returns to domestic life. For de Maistre, this is a departure from his usually

²⁹² Owen Heathcote, *Balzac and Violence: Representing History, Space, Sexuality and Death in La Comédie Humaine*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 77.

²⁹³ Joseph de Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 14 vols., (Lyon: Librairie Générale Catholique et Classique, 1891), 4, p. 32-4.

cynical view of human nature; with respect to the hangman, he is ambivalent.²⁹⁴ Although his reasoning is not entirely spurious, de Maistre neglects to consider the virtual inevitability that the executioner is never fully distinct from the man with whom he shares body, mind, and soul. He takes for granted that the two identities cannot encroach upon one another. It is at the hypothetical point where these two characters mix that de Maistre abandons his study; consistent with much of his thought, the Savoyard reactionary views the world in stark contrasts, reconstructing his visions in essentially binary terms; thus, any conflation thereof is inconceivable. This is also where Balzac's Sanson becomes a sort of foil to de Maistre's *bourreau*; although operating under many of the same assumptions, Sanson's remorse—the moral burden he appears to carry—suggests to us that Balzac makes no such distinction between the hangman, and Charles-Henri Sanson.

Balzac and de Maistre share at least a basic view of the *bourreau* as a character type; this is evident, albeit briefly, when Sanson defies preconceptions by expressing sympathy for those who have suffered the Revolution's justice, of which he is in important ways *la pierre angulaire*; he brings terror, yet also wishes to alleviate its effects. Similarly, Ballanche complicates the *Régicide* by fashioning him as both the deciding vote in favor of the King's execution, and by implying that if he had voted otherwise, surely providence would have required that another cast the condemnatory vote in his stead. Both examples fit the Maistrean ideal; Balzac's Sanson, the otherwise compassionate royalist, who nevertheless executes the king with his own hands; *le Régicide*, exponent of terror, yet also a penitent witness to Ballanche's philosophy of history. These characters reflect the problematic archetypes upon which we formulate many of our assumptions, imploring us to abandon for a moment any partisan convictions, so we might observe that beneath the obfuscating veil of factional contrivances there typically exist individuals whose triumphs and errors defy

²⁹⁴ For a discussion of de Maistre's views on capital punishment, see: Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, ed. by Henry Hardy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 160-3. For a more recent discussion on this subject, see: Ève Morisi, *Capital Letters: Hugo, Baudelaire, Camus, and the Death Penalty*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pp. 94-101.

stereotype and assumption. De Maistre understood this well, in principle at least; he grasps the danger of generic condemnation even if he could never extend it to those like *le Régicide*, who committed perhaps the only unpardonable transgression:

Il y eut certainement parmi ceux-ci [les juges de Louis XVI] des coupables bien délibérés, qu'il est impossible de détester assez; mais ces grands coupables avaient eu l'art d'exciter une telle terreur, ils avaient fait sur les esprits moins vigoureux une telle impression, que plusieurs députés, je n'en doute nullement, furent privés d'une partie de leur libre arbitre. Il est difficile de se former une idée nette du délire indéfinissable et surnaturel qui s'empara de l'assemblée à l'époque du jugement de Louis XVI. Je suis persuadé que plusieurs des coupables, en se rappelant cette funeste époque, croient avoir fait un mauvais rêve; qu'ils sont tentés de douter de ce qu'ils ont fait, et qu'ils s'expliquent moins que nous ne pouvons les expliquer eux-mêmes.²⁹⁵

This passage, written in 1797, some decades before *L'Homme sans nom* and *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, anticipates the fundamental concerns of both works. For all its reactionary fury, de Maistre betrays an underlying desire to understand, to decode the Revolution's providential meaning, down to its most irrational and profane. This is also the project undertaken in *L'Homme sans nom* and *Un épisode sous la Terreur*. The former expresses the profound despair of isolation, boldly exploring the labyrinthine psyche of a man ill-suited to the age in which he finds himself. *Le Régicide's* romantic self-consciousness so effectively lends to the text an essence of sentimentalism, thus giving the reader a glimpse into the unhallowed *Régicide's* journey toward salvation and, importantly, reconciliation. In the latter, meanwhile, we find Charles-Henri Sanson, *le promeneur solitaire*, apparently also in search of a sort of absolution.

²⁹⁵ J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 14 vols., (Lyon: Librairie Générale Catholique et Classique, 1884), 1, p. 143.

As Balzac himself begins to overcome the romantic vogue, it becomes clear that Sanson might actually be seeking a material salvation. In this regard Balzac's story highlights a "transactionality" which becomes integral in his later work. Sanson expends both social and material capital in service of his quest for forgiveness; he offers much needed material relief to the Carmelites, perhaps in exchange (he hopes) for absolution. Is the king's soiled *mouchoir*, which Sanson offers as a gift to his hosts, not as much a commoditized souvenir of the execution as it is a sacred relic?²⁹⁶ Sanson's function, meanwhile, his indispensable service as *bourreau*, affords him a freedom of movement in a city gripped by fear and paranoia, yet the cost of such freedom is precisely the source of his moral turmoil.

Ultimately *le Régicide* leaves it up to the reader (and to history) to decide his eternal guilt, while Sanson wavers between spiritual exculpation and an innate will to live. We might say that Ballanche's *Régicide* and Balzac's Sanson arrive at the moment of regicidal action on inverted timelines; the one a virulent revolutionary who comes to defend the family he condemned, the other a royalist Catholic whose duty compels him to partake in the execution of god's temporal political representative. In both texts we encounter individuals thrust out into the wilderness in search of moral absolution; Ballanche's great sinner must seek out spiritual forgiveness in terrestrial solitude, while Sanson feigns metaphysical conflict as a masquerade for social pressures. These moral complexities arise most notably as both protagonists struggle to demystify the riddle of history, but importantly, as they search out their own place within its designs.

²⁹⁶ See: Tom Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c. 1790-1890*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 5.

Chapter 4. Revolutionary backstory in *La Comédie humaine*

Après les bouleversements politiques viennent les bouleversements dans les mœurs.

-Balzac, *La vieille fille*

Introduction

When the name Sanson next appears in the *Comédie*, in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1836), it is under vastly different and far more conspicuous circumstances. Written nearly a decade after *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, and set around thirty years after the regicide, the Sanson we encounter in *Splendeurs* is not Charles-Henri, the executioner of Louis XVI but his son Henri, the executioner of Marie-Antoinette. It is interesting to observe in this scene in *Splendeurs* how in one generation *le bourreau* no longer strikes fear in those who meet him, but has become a rather unremarkable, innocuous acquaintance. He is an antiquated ornament which ties the *Comédie*'s Restoration tableau to its revolutionary—and to a lesser extent, its *Ancien Régime*—origins. In Balzac's Revolution of *Un épisode sous la Terreur* the character of the elder Sanson had featured as an imposing, mysterious figure, evoking shock and terror, representing a personification of revolutionary violence. Sanson *fils*, "Homme grand et gros, dont le visage rouge et long ne manquait pas d'une certaine distinction", inhabits a vastly different niche in *Splendeurs*.²⁹⁷ His family name still evokes a certain memory of the Revolution, though he no longer embodies—in contrast to his father in *Un épisode*—that Maistrian conception of the executioner as a chilling incarnation of divine justice. In fact, his introduction in *Splendeurs* is somewhat comical; Vautrin deliberately

²⁹⁷ Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981) 6, p. 858.

refers to him as *l'aumônier*, to which he coldly responds, “non monsieur . . . j’ai d’autres fonctions.”²⁹⁸ What immediately follows this scene is a brief genealogy of the Sanson family; aged around sixty at the time of the novel’s action, Henri Sanson—*ce terrible fonctionnaire*—as Balzac explains in a brief digression, is the terminus of an ancient bloodline that has fallen on hard times:

Les Sanson, bourreaux à Rouen pendant deux siècles, avant d’être revêtus de la première charge du royaume, exécutaient de père en fils les arrêts de la Justice depuis le treizième siècle. Il est peu de familles qui puissent offrir l’exemple d’un office ou d’une noblesse conservée de père en fils pendant six siècles.²⁹⁹

Although not noble in a conventional sense, the decline of the Sanson name is not entirely unlike the ordeals of those other, more esteemed ancient families who appear in the *Comédie*.³⁰⁰ Yet just beneath the man’s well-manicured façade are memories of his vocation, and of the Revolution.

In considering these two iterations of the executioner, it is important to note that Balzac’s conception of the French Revolution is better exemplified in the Sanson of *Splendeurs et misères* than that of his father in *Un épisode sous la Terreur*. By this we mean that Balzac rarely sets his novels during the Revolution, yet he never strays far from its mementos and effects. It is therefore appropriate to begin this chapter as both Ronnie Butler and René-Alexandre Courteix have done before me, by invoking André Wurmser’s deeply insightful, succinct distillation of Balzac’s immense œuvre as “*La Comédie humaine, ou Des*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 858-9.

³⁰⁰ The name itself becomes, as Christopher Prendergast explains, a “primary linguistic marker of personal identity . . . a marketable asset.” Surely this is the case with Sanson, who moves within these circles, in no small part, because of the prestige (or infamy) afforded by virtue of his lineage. See: Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 87-8.

conséquences de la Révolution française.”³⁰¹ The Sanson of *Splendeurs* is himself one such consequence, his mere presence in the scene evokes in the novel’s characters—as perhaps it did in the contemporary reader of Balzac—a vague, yet chilling memory of revolutionary France. But Sanson also represents the assimilation of the Revolution into the tapestry of the present; although he blends well enough into the tableau, there is still something in his appearance which indicates his past occupation:

Le seul indice qui, chez cet homme, trahissait le sang des vieux tortionnaires du Moyen Âge, était une largeur et une épaisseur formidables dans les mains. Assez instruit d’ailleurs, tenant fort à sa qualité de citoyen et d’électeur, passionné, dit-on, pour le jardinage, ce grand et gros homme, parlant bas, d’un maintien calme, très silencieux, au front large et chauve, ressemblait beaucoup plus à un membre de l’aristocratie anglaise qu’à un exécuteur des hautes œuvres.³⁰²

The description above functions as more than an incidental scene dressing; Sanson, while perhaps exceptional because he is a historical figure, here serves as a sort of bridge between epochs. The man who had executed Marie Antoinette some thirty years earlier is now the butt of Vautrin’s gibes, his revolutionary past conveyed in the subtleties of his appearance (and the author’s digression). This is the type of backstory that appears frequently in the *Comédie humaine*, serving as a motif which reminds us that much of the intrigue and drama, triumph and decline, of the years 1815-48 is rooted in the Revolution. But while thematic frequency indicates that the Revolution was important to Balzac, alone it is insufficient justification for such a study as this. One expects that such characters, mere decades removed from such a monumental event, would have been impacted, either directly—having lived through it—or by inheriting its effects. This of course includes Balzac himself,

³⁰¹ André Wurmser, *La comédie inhumaine*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 574.

³⁰² Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, 6, p. 859.

for whom the Revolution was much more than an unavoidable historical precedent. René-Alexandre Courteix's *Balzac et la Révolution française*, which is perhaps the most comprehensive study of the Revolution's influence on Balzac's thought, gives us a clear idea of just how important it was in shaping the author's political views, the content of his novels, and the point at which the two frequently met. Courteix asks, in the context of Wurmser's view, "Comment...ne pas supposer que toute l'œuvre de Balzac est marquée dans ses profondeurs par l'empreinte révolutionnaire?"³⁰³ My intention in this chapter is to elucidate a peculiar sort of "empreinte révolutionnaire", to show how Balzac's use of the Revolution as both (and often simultaneously) an historical event and a memory or backstory contributes to the formation of a national myth in a way unique to his corpus.

If we consider *Un épisode sous la Terreur* as a sort of prefatory entry point into the *Comédie humaine*—and by the same token, the Revolution as its chronological genesis—Wurmser's idea takes on considerably more relevance and warrants further interrogation. Across Balzac's work we certainly do find numerous characters whose names, occupations, social statuses, and fortunes were transformed—like the Sansons—by the Revolution; in other words, the effects of the Revolution often dictate their circumstances in Balzac's novels. These personal changes typically correspond to broader social ones; Balzac takes characters like René, Adolphe de S., and the many correspondents in the works of Charrière, Genlis, Sénac and the like, ages them by a few decades, and shows how they have been forced to adapt to postrevolutionary French society. And this is precisely why Balzac's *mal du siècle* is rarely superfluous or abstract, for it is always explicitly linked to historical and contemporary conditions. His *types* do not recede into the sanctum of the self; rather, they face the reality of their circumstances. According to Barbéris, "la difficulté d'être" for these characters "est difficulté d'être dans le monde actuel, non dans le monde en soi."³⁰⁴ To this

³⁰³ René-Alexandre Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, (Paris, Presse Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 4.

³⁰⁴ Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 1, p. 111.

point, neither Sanson's guilt nor the old nun's despair drives them to Oberman's solitude or René's wilderness, but it instead propels them back into the very social milieu which has caused their anguish in the first place. This is particularly true of the former; Sanson exemplifies the social alleviation of revolutionary trauma because he chooses a communal setting, rather than a personal one, to attain absolution for his sins. But since nearly all of Balzac's fictions are set after the Revolution, it is imperative to ask what this same sort of revolutionary experience looks like when we enter the *Comédie's* nineteenth century, once the Revolution has become integrated into both French society and the individual psyche, not as a contemporary event, but as an historical memory.

The Revolution as backstory

Although the specific examples of revolutionary backstory in any of Balzac's novels do vary according to the peculiarities of a given plot or character, its function in the *Comédie humaine* generally is rather less distinctive, and is an integral part of the author's broader, realist artistic vision. Backstory, in other words, functions as part of an aesthetics which prioritizes the mimetic representation of the world as it is, down to minute, incidental detail. The past lives of Balzac's characters often appear in much the same way as do the author's descriptions of the homes in which these people live, the objects which adorn their dwellings, the clothes they wear and meals they eat, with each detail giving a unique texture or a local color to the immense symphony of the *Comédie's* voices. Perhaps of equal importance, backstory allows for a momentary break with the diegetic present, for a coherent and direct engagement with the past, where Balzac uses analepsis to show how history—but specifically the Revolution—plays a crucial role in the formation of contemporary French society. When introduced in this manner, backstory affixes personal experience to historical events, expanding the *Comédie's* realist scope well beyond its

postrevolutionary milieu. We can see how this functions in a general sense by looking at one of the *Comédie*'s earliest works, *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), where a break with the present occurs explicitly, with the narrator interrupting his own description of Felix Grandet's provincial home by stating, "Il est impossible de comprendre la valeur de cette expression provinciale sans donner la biographie de monsieur Grandet."³⁰⁵ This flashback commences, of course, in 1789, where we find the middle-aged cooper involved in the politics of Saumur, perhaps not as a neutral party, but certainly not as a fervent partisan either. As the narrator explains, Grandet was tentatively engaged in the local revolutionary government, "[il] passa pour un homme hardi, un républicain, un patriote, pour un esprit qui donnait dans les nouvelles idées, tandis que le tonnelier donnait tout bonnement dans les vignes."³⁰⁶ Yet Grandet also opposed, even undermined the Revolution's persecutorial programs, seemingly for moral reasons. This compelled him to assist the Revolution's victims and to protect their property, but it did not, as we have seen above, alter his own political leanings, nor did it preclude his business dealings with the oppressors:

Politiquement, il protégea les ci-devant et empêcha de tout son pouvoir la vente des biens des émigrés; commercialement, il fournit aux armées républicaines un ou deux milliers de pièces de vin blanc, et se fit payer en superbes prairies dépendant d'une communauté de femmes que l'on avait réservée pour un dernier lot.³⁰⁷

The image of Grandet presented to us in his backstory is one of a complicated, amoral yet "real" man, one wedged between principles and circumstances—like many of Balzac's characters—as he navigates the Revolution's tedious political climate. It also presents a challenge to the common enough, oversimplified (mis)reading of Grandet as a miserly

³⁰⁵ Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*, 3, p. 1030.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1031.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Balzacian Harpagon.³⁰⁸ For although Grandet indeed benefits from the sale of *biens nationaux*, never does he exploit the misfortunes of his fellow *Saumurois*, a point which is clear from his willingness to purchase only *biens* which had belonged to the church, not any of those confiscated from *émigrés*.³⁰⁹

In this regard Grandet is the archetype of a virtuous revolutionary, similar to someone like the father of Émile Blondet. Although the man is never given a name, we are provided a fairly detailed biography of the elder Blondet; a lawyer before 1789, during the Revolution he was made *accusateur public*, a position which he executed with relative principle and compassion: “Il fut le plus doux de ces terribles fonctionnaires.”³¹⁰ Much like Grandet, Blondet executes the office as a sort of double agent, as we see in the following: “Il avait amorti l’action révolutionnaire en acquiesçant à tout et n’exécutant rien. Forcé d’emprisonner quelques nobles, il avait mis tant de lenteur à leur procès, qu’il leur fit atteindre au neuf thermidor avec une adresse qui lui avait concilié l’estime générale.”³¹¹

Grandet and Blondet are, in their respective ways, exemplars of the Balzacian revolutionary experience; the Revolution is for both a transformative moment, and thus their lives and careers are permanently altered by its onset. For the latter, however, there is not much of note after 9 Thermidor. Blondet’s career stalls under the Empire, when he is passed over and eventually relegated to an unspectacular twilight; perhaps there is henceforth little need for his brand of *Ancien Régime* moderation. Grandet’s story on the other hand, which merges social and material transformation under the banner of Revolution, foreshadows the circumstances in which we find him some decades later, all while adding depth and nuance to his personality. In this regard, Grandet conforms to a certain type which reappears throughout the *Comédie*, a sort of provincial king of the

³⁰⁸ Pierre-Georges Castex, ‘L’Ascension de M. Grandet’, *Blzac Colloque*, (Paris: Europe, 1965), p. 248.

³⁰⁹ René-Alexandre Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, (Paris, Presse Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 244.

³¹⁰ Balzac, *Le cabinet des antiques*, 4, p. 1064.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

ascendent bourgeoisie, whose rise begins during (and because of) the Revolution. Importantly, Grandet's backstory fuses parallel temporal narratives, the historical and personal, into one literary-historical timeline, what Bakhtin has described in relation to realist conceptions of temporality as a motif wherein "the graphically visible markers of historical time are concentrated and condensed... [where] they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch."³¹² The epoch, Bakhtin continues, "becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time]."³¹³ Grandet's ascent, according to this idea, highlights a confluence of narrative streams, both of which converge around his revolutionary backstory and lead us toward his present circumstances.

We see an ostensibly similar ascent in a character like Goriot, who owes to the Revolution his career, financial successes and much of the corresponding material wealth, as well as social privileges he once enjoyed (but has since lost). In contrast to Grandet, who at worst behaves in an ethical, albeit opportunistic manner, Goriot uses his political station during the Revolution to pervert the market for flour, taking advantage of the hungry and desperate, as we see in the following passage:

[Goriot] a été président de sa section pendant la Révolution; il a été dans le secret de la fameuse disette, et a commencé sa fortune par vendre dans ce temps-là des farines dix fois plus qu'elles ne lui coûtaient. Il en a eu tant qu'il en a voulu... Ce Goriot partageait sans doute, comme tous ces gens-là, avec le Comité de Salut Public.³¹⁴

³¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), p. 247.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ Balzac, *Le père Goriot*, 3, p. 114.

Goriot is presented here, like Grandet, as a man who has seized upon the unique opportunities afforded to him by the Revolution. In stark contrast to the Saumurois cooper, however, Goriot is unscrupulous—even immoral—in his business dealings. But the important detail in both backstories, although it is more starkly presented in that of Goriot, is that the Revolution facilitates a personal metamorphosis; it does not simply afford him an opportunity but permits a sort of commercial ruthlessness, which was conspicuously absent in his character, we are told, prior to 1789: “Jean-Joachim Goriot était, avant la Révolution, un simple ouvrier vermicellier, habile, économe, et assez entreprenant pour avoir acheté le fonds de son maître, que le hasard rendit victime du premier soulèvement de 1789.”³¹⁵ This success and gain becomes an albatross around his neck during the Restoration, when *Le Père Goriot* takes place. Now in the twilight of his life, *l’ancien vermicellier* is still linked to a revolutionary past which, under the political sensibilities of the restored monarchy is understood not as a triumph or virtue, but as an affliction to Goriot’s character and a foil to his prior success. As Sandy Petrey explains, Goriot’s backstory functions as a sort of catalyst to the novel’s conflict:

By killing his employer, the French Revolution put Goriot in a position to profit from the grain shortages to come. By aggravating those shortages, the Revolution made his profit immense. Because his wealth then permitted the marriages desired by his two daughters, every moment in the ascendant phase of Goriot’s life was directly due to the situation of France at the time it was lived... Goriot’s descending phase was just as tightly connected to vast historical movements. Under the Bourbon Restoration, the nonaristocratic source of their wealth became an intolerable embarrassment to Goriot’s daughters... Elevated by the Revolution, Goriot was abased by its aftermath.³¹⁶

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 123.

³¹⁶ Sandy Petrey, *Realism and Revolution*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 83-4.

The important point Petry makes here is that Goriot's rise, and his subsequent fall, correspond almost perfectly with the evolution of political sentiment during his lifetime. Ronnie Butler makes a similar observation, explaining that the transformation of political authority during the Revolution, Empire, Restoration, and July Monarchy are exemplified in a novel like *Le Père Goriot* by emphasizing simultaneous and corresponding socioeconomic changes.³¹⁷ But Goriot's experience is more than political and material, it is also deeply rooted, as Petry implies, in the shifting of *mœurs*. We must therefore interpret Delphine and Anastasie's abandonment of their old father as a tacit acknowledgement that his past is incompatible with the aristocratic world which, through marriage and the old man's now diminished wealth, has become their own. Even if it is not uttered explicitly, Goriot is by this point an outmoded holdover from another age; his decline and death are therefore inevitable and perhaps even cathartic for the other characters. Through this family drama in *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac constructs a framework for generational frictions and contrasts as they exist both broadly across society and between individuals; the old man's revolutionary past gives an historical explanation to these intergenerational distinctions in *mœurs*.

Backstory, as we have seen with Goriot, provides a concrete historical genesis of the man himself, while adding context to the rather unfortunate state of his family's affairs. How Goriot attained his wealth in the first place is an important piece of information, for it indicates that he is an upstart who profited directly because of the unique circumstances which were brought about by the Revolution. And despite Vautrin's insistence that "Il n'y a pas de principes, il n'y a que des événements; il n'y a pas de lois, il n'y a que des circonstances",³¹⁸ Goriot, as we see throughout the novel—although nowhere else is it perhaps so clear as when he is rejected by the Baron Nucingen, his own son-in-law—is cast

³¹⁷ Ronnie Butler, *Balzac and the French Revolution*, (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 172.

³¹⁸ Balzac, *Le père Goriot*, 3, p. 144.

off because of his class origins and the source of his wealth; it might have better served Vautrin to add that *il n'y a pas de morale, il n'y a que les mœurs*.

To capitalize in such a way as did Goriot does not necessarily beget social ostracism, however; both Frédéric Taillefer and César Birotteau, to use two notable examples, enriched themselves, to varying degrees, at the expense of others' misfortunes during the Revolution. The former's wealth, although the direct result of a grave criminal act committed during the Revolution, which is recounted diegetically—as a literary *mise en abîme*—in *L'Auberge rouge* (1831),³¹⁹ proves no insurmountable social obstacle despite its more heinous nature. A military surgeon in 1799, we learn that the young Taillefer murdered and robbed a wealthy boarding mate—then allowed a friend, one Prosper Magnan to face capital punishment for the crime, a secret which is only revealed later by none other than Vautrin: “Le père Taillefer est un vieux coquin qui passe pour avoir assassiné l'un de ses amis pendant la Révolution.”³²⁰ The crime and criminal, along with his scapegoat, serve as background for both Taillefer and the nation more broadly. It is an allegorical representation of revolutionary France and its effects—a national backstory—as we see for instance in the physical description of Magnan:

Je vis donc Prosper Magnan au moment où il entra dans la prison d'Andernach, et il m'inspira la plus profonde pitié. Quoiqu'il fût pâle, défait, taché de sang, sa physionomie avait un caractère de candeur et d'innocence qui me frappa vivement... Véritable image de mon pays défaillant, il m'apparut comme une victime et non comme un meurtrier. Au moment où il passa sous ma fenêtre, il

³¹⁹ The name Taillefer was only added in the 1837 edition of the text. This would have been news to Balzac's readers, since *Père Goriot* was published two years prior to the republication of *L'Auberge rouge*. In the later edition of the nouvelle, Balzac adds Taillefer's name where it had not been previously.

³²⁰ Balzac, *Le père Goriot*, 3, p. 143.

jeta, je ne sais où, le sourire amer et mélancolique d'un aliéné qui retrouve une fugitive lueur de raison. Ce sourire n'était certes pas celui d'un assassin.³²¹

Magnan serves here as a conspicuous metaphor for postrevolutionary France as Balzac views it, worn down and abused, yet perhaps not entirely devoid of hope. Taillefer, meanwhile, represents the worst characteristics of the ascendent class in its infancy, a triumph of licentiousness and materialism. And although he is a relatively minor, fantastically wealthy character later, in *Le Père Goriot*, Taillefer's revolutionary backstory exemplifies the fact that morality in Balzac's world is malleable, highly subjective, or nonexistent.

As we saw already in the case of Felix Grandet, the *Comédie*'s treatment of revolutionary origins does not typically imply moral indifference, or outright immorality, to the degree one observes in outlier characters like Taillefer, or indeed like Doctor Rouget in *La Rabouilleuse* (1842)—“En 1792... un homme profondément malicieux”—but is often morally ambiguous, functioning as an observation of, and a discourse on, social evolution in an almost zoological sense, rather than moral tongue-lashing; recall the author's admiration, in the *Avant-propos*, for the naturalist Buffon.³²² Balzac is more concerned with showing, in these and similar instances, how the Revolution sets in motion for many of his characters a material rise which continues, largely uninterrupted, through the Empire into the Restoration. These observed changes do not, in other words, commence incidentally on or after 1789, nor are they the inevitable consequences of the passage of time, or of some vague conception of social evolution. Rather, the Revolution is *the* critical socio-historical catalyst. It is therefore not incidental that we are introduced to the malevolent Doctor Rouget in 1792, for although he is a minor—yet important—part of the novel's plot (he dies in 1805), it is at this moment that his future in-laws, the Descoings, fortify their already considerable textile fortune through the purchase of *biens nationaux*. Rouget eventually

³²¹ Balzac, *L'Auberge rouge*, 11, p. 107.

³²² Ronnie Butler, *Balzac and the French Revolution*, (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 253.

attains control of the Descoings' wealth, bequeathing it to his son—and notably not to his daughter Agathe—a decision whose consequences lie at the very heart of the subsequent three decades of this family drama. Doctor Rouget thus fulfils a single purpose in *La Rabouilleuse*, linking the lives and society of his progeny some decades later to the Revolution.

It matters little that Rouget has no physical presence beyond the novel's first scene, for his ultimate purpose is to serve as a revolutionary backstory, anchoring the work's drama in a specific historical context. And this fact is important, as Ronnie Butler has argued, because in the *Comédie* it is revolutionary activities and experiences—as opposed to those undertaken during the *Ancien Régime* or Empire—that are typically more indicative of later outcomes during the Restoration, the period during which much of Balzac's work takes place.³²³ One need look no further than the revolutionary backstory of someone like César Birotteau, who represents one of the more complete examples, across Balzac's œuvre, of a character formed and guided through the following decades by decisions he made during the Revolution. In 1792, when we first encounter the teen-aged Birotteau, he has just set out for Paris in search of fortune, nearly penniless save for his one *louis d'or*. Hired soon after as a *garçon de magasin* at the prestigious—and royalist—Ragon perfumery, *La Reine des roses*, the political moment proves decisive for César, whose modest circumstances rapidly improve as a direct result of the Revolution:

Le jour où la terrible réquisition de l'an II fit maison nette chez le citoyen Ragon, César Birotteau, promu second commis, profita de la circonstance pour obtenir cinquante livres d'appointements par mois, et s'assit à la table des Ragon avec une jouissance ineffable. Le second commis de la Reine des Roses, déjà riche de six cents francs, eut une chambre où il put convenablement serrer dans des meubles

³²³ *Ibid*, p. 141.

longtemps convoités les nippes qu'il s'était amassées. Les jours de décadi, mis comme les jeunes gens de l'époque à qui la mode ordonnait d'affecter des manières brutales, ce doux et modeste paysan avait un air qui le rendait au moins leur égal, et il franchit ainsi les barrières qu'en d'autres temps la domesticité eût mises entre la bourgeoisie et lui. Vers la fin de cette année, sa probité le fit placer à la caisse. L'imposante citoyenne Ragon veillait au linge du commis, et les deux marchands se familiarisèrent avec lui.³²⁴

The Revolution, as we see, clears aside many of the social obstacles which might have otherwise impeded Birotteau's ascent, and by 1795 his single *louis* has centupled; thus, his future success—as both a perfumier and a speculator—are given a concrete genesis. But the effects for Birotteau reach beyond financial ones; his employer's devotion to the recently deposed monarchy becomes his own, as we see in the following:

Monsieur Ragon, ancien parfumeur de Sa Majesté la reine Marie-Antoinette, confia dans ces moments critiques son attachement pour les tyrans déchus à César Birotteau. Cette confiance fut une des circonstances capitales de la vie de César. Les conversations du soir, quand la boutique était close, la rue calme et la caisse faite, fanatisèrent le Tourangeau qui, en devenant royaliste, obéissait à ses sentiments innés. Le narré des vertueuses actions de Louis XVI, les anecdotes par lesquelles les deux époux exaltaient les mérites de la reine, échauffèrent l'imagination de César. L'horrible sort de ces deux têtes couronnées, tranchées à quelques pas de la boutique, révolta son cœur sensible et lui donna de la haine pour un système de gouvernement à qui le sang innocent ne coûtait rien à répandre. L'intérêt commercial lui montrait la mort du négoce dans le maximum et dans les

³²⁴ Balzac, *César Birotteau*, 6, p. 56-7.

orages politiques, toujours ennemis des affaires. En vrai parfumeur, il haïssait d'ailleurs une révolution qui mettait tout le monde à la Titus et supprimait la poudre. La tranquillité que procure le pouvoir absolu pouvant seule donner la vie à l'argent, il se fanatisa pour la royauté.³²⁵

Balzac here ties together two distinct aspects of the Revolution as they pertain to Birotteau's early life, highlighting economic effects while creating an almost mythological view of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette—a common enough view among royalists of the time—as beacons of virtue, and sacred martyrs. Perhaps most resonant in the above passage, however, is the characters' proximity to these monumental events, specifically to the execution of the king and queen, their heads “tranchées à quelques pas de la boutique.” While not a direct victim of the Terror Ragon, clearly a witness, endures a sort of revolutionary trauma that seems to be transmitted as well to César, signifying for him a political awakening. Plunged into counterrevolutionary politics, Birotteau finds himself on the front lines at Saint-Roch during the royalist insurrection of 13 vendémiaire, where he is wounded, put off from the military life, but not from the greater cause; thereafter “il résolut d'être purement et simplement un parfumeur royaliste, sans jamais plus se compromettre, et s'adonna corps et âme à sa partie.”³²⁶

The way *César Birotteau* presents royalist sympathies, by conflating economic interest and political belief with personal sentiment, shows a more complexly intimate, multifaceted, and human side to the public spectacle, specifically to the execution of the Royal family. What is perhaps most interesting is how César is influenced by the disposition of his employer; Ragon's loyalty to the monarchy becomes Birotteau's, which he retains even much later in the novel, for example when he characterizes the regicide in starkly religious terms: “je ne croirai jamais que le jour où le fils de Dieu fut mis à mort par les

³²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 57-58.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 58.

hommes est un jour heureux. On interrompt bien toutes les affaires pour le 21 janvier.”³²⁷ Birotteau’s statement here is important because it expresses, over two decades later, in the early years of the Restoration, the idea of commemoration, in a paschal sense; like Sanson in *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, Birotteau recognizes 21 January as a sacred day. The primary difference is that of distance; for Sanson and the Carmelites the regicide is a fresh wound, while for César it has become an historical (and personal) memory, one which is worthy of consecration and adoption into the national mythos.

This brief comment in *César Birotteau* shows how revolutionary memory influences contemporary *mœurs*, but it is also broadly representative of how Balzacian realism utilizes such details of backstory to convey depth of character—i.e. César’s personal attachment to this memory—while simultaneously monumentalizing the singularly important historical event in a more ubiquitously social context. The regicide is uniquely effective in highlighting the persistent memory (which is often a traumatic one) of the Revolution, and while it is not necessarily the case that César is afflicted by revolutionary trauma, it is nevertheless evident that he is forever altered by the event. Therefore, when he suggests much later in life that 21 January should be a day of mourning—a somber, religious holiday—he is referring implicitly back to a personal memory which, now viewed through the lens of Restoration sensibilities, conflates individual trauma with collective memory.

Of course, memory of the Revolution—and the consequences of those memories—can (and do) take many other forms in the *Comédie*. Individual backstories, which are highly subjective, yet converge on the revolutionary decade, often foreshadow contemporary views and activities, rationalizing and adding important context to what would otherwise be vague and ambiguous beliefs and behaviors. For César Birotteau memory compels a relatively small gesture of commemoration, yet one with a profound sentimental value; recall that he avows to remain “un parfumeur royaliste.” In other instances, like that of Félicité des

³²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 122.

Touches in *Béatrix* (1839), memory is something shared primarily between reader and narrator, for although she is surely aware of her own revolutionary backstory, it is unlikely that this knowledge comes from memory, since des Touches is quite literally a child of the Revolution.

Born in 1791 to devoutly royalist Breton nobility, Félicité des Touches was subjected from infancy to the effects of revolutionary violence. As the narrator recounts,

[Elle] s'est trouvée orpheline en 1793. Ses biens échappèrent ainsi aux confiscations qu'auraient sans doute encourues son père et son frère. Le premier mourut au 10 août, tué sur le seuil du palais, parmi les défenseurs du roi, auprès de qui l'appelait son grade de major aux gardes de la porte. Son frère, jeune garde du corps, fut massacre aux Carmes. Mlle des Touches avait deux ans quand sa mère mourut tuée par le chagrin, quelques jours après cette seconde catastrophe. En mourant, Mme des Touches confia sa fille à sa sœur, une religieuse de Chelles.³²⁸

Starkly reminiscent of the experience of Adolphe in Nodier's *Thérèse Aubert*, or one of Genlis' *petits émigrés*, it is surprising that des Touches does not become an arch-reactionary, like madame de la Chanterie, for instance, once she reaches adulthood. Instead, she matures into one of Balzac's most idiosyncratic women; precocious and independent, Félicité des Touches is in many ways an affront to her sex. Félicien Marceau describes her as a "garçon manqué", explaining that "Elle a d'ailleurs quelque chose de viril dans le caractère. Jamais nous ne la verrons rêver au mariage. Elle n'a besoin de personne. Elle n'a le goût ni du foyer, ni de la maternité."³²⁹ And while there is nothing overtly political in the development of her character, it is also clear that the Revolution, because it has made of her an orphan, has also liberated her from the confines of her own birth. The details of Félicité's childhood

³²⁸ Balzac, *Béatrix*, 2, p. 688-9.

³²⁹ Félicien Marceau, *Balzac et Son Monde*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 135.

are perhaps incidental to a degree, but not at all inconsequential; it is certainly important that she was orphaned by the Revolution, for although there were other ways for a child to become an orphan, only this one could have destroyed both family and class privilege.

We see in the case of Madame des Touches an instance of backstory that gives important context to the reader, yet has only a limited role in directly shaping the character. Her revolutionary memory is therefore implicit; her life's purpose does not become an overt, conscious response to revolutionary trauma, but is certainly a direct result of it. This is a stark contrast to madame de la Chanterie, in *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine* (1848), for whom the consequences of revolutionary memory are explicit and innate to both her character and vocation: her entire postrevolutionary existence is, in no small way, an effect of a revolutionary backstory and the residual memory of it. Matron of a covert Catholic, royalist society, *les frères de la consolation*, Madame de la Chanterie is among the *Comédie's* more zealous anti-Revolution voices, "attachée aux Bourbons jusqu'au fanatisme, ennemie de la révolution française, et ne reconnaissait la domination de Napoléon que comme une plaie que la Providence infligeait à la France, en punition des attentats de 1793."³³⁰ With such an explicitly Maistrrian view of events, one which is reflected not simply in belief, but in action, we are compelled to ask how she has become such an avowed counterrevolutionary. For although one is given only fragments of madame de la Chanterie's backstory, we suspect that her ideological disposition is the product of a profound trauma. Again, the Revolution's effects are presented as a mélange of personal and historical; the young bride is thrust into the political world during the Revolution's most violent phase, a fact which is not incidental, since this violence visits her directly, impelling Chanterie to sacrifice herself as a good wife. Her disloyal husband, a powerful and hated republican functionary whose actions during the Revolution made him many enemies, eventually ensnares his young wife and she is swept up

³³⁰ Balzac, *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, 8, p. 289.

after 9 Thermidor. Madame de la Chanterie's backstory is perhaps the most comprehensive of any in the *Comédie*, and of course it begins with the Revolution:

L'ancien maître des requêtes, devenu l'un des plus féroces présidents de tribunal révolutionnaire qui existât, fut la terreur de la Normandie et put ainsi satisfaire toutes ses passions. À son tour emprisonné lors de la chute de Robespierre, la haine de son Département le vouait à une mort certaine. Madame de La Chanterie apprend par une lettre d'adieu le sort qui attend son mari. Aussitôt, après avoir confié sa petite fille à une voisine, elle se rend dans la ville où le misérable était détenu, munie de quelques louis qui composaient sa fortune ; ces louis lui servirent à pénétrer dans la prison, elle réussit à faire sauver son mari, qu'elle habille avec ses vêtements à elle, dans des circonstances presque semblables à celles qui, plus tard, servirent si bien madame de Lavalette. Elle fut condamnée à mort, mais on eut honte de donner suite à cette vengeance, et le tribunal, jadis présidé par son mari, facilita sous main sa sortie de prison. Elle revint à Paris, à pied, sans secours, en couchant dans des fermes et souvent nourrie par charité.³³¹

Madame de la Chanterie's past is relayed to us as a diegetic narrative story in a sort of cadence, almost like the recitation of melodramatic verse: "oh, ce n'est rien... ce n'est rien encore..." as a seemingly endless sequence of misfortunes. Imprisoned and condemned because of her personal loyalty, by the final years of the Empire persistent revolutionary violence has taken not only her freedom, but also her daughter's life. Madame de la Chanterie's revolutionary memory rationalizes her position among *les frères*, thus backstory is integral to understanding both her character and the world she inhabits. At the same time, we might say that hers is in part an "historical" trauma—that the personal and historical

³³¹ *Ibid*, p. 285-286.

contribute equally to her recollection of the Revolution. These dual sentiments are expressed most clearly in her final lines of the novel, where she laments her life's great losses, at once personal, world-historical, and religious: "Par Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette, que je vois sur leur échafaud... par ma fille... par Jésus..."³³²

The above example highlights yet another of the many characters in the *Comédie* for whom the Revolution is their life's formative event, setting the stage for their later activities and dispositions. In *L'Envers de l'histoire* this connection is explicitly ideological, providing essential context to one of the novel's central characters. But revolutionary trauma need not so explicitly shape the social and ideological dispositions of a given character; the fundamental component is that such a person could have—indeed must have—existed and must therefore have experienced such traumas as madame de la Chanterie does. This in any case is central to Thomas Pavel's discourse on Balzac in his *Fictional worlds*. According to Pavel, Balzac's act of creation was to introduce a few thousand additional characters to nineteenth-century France: "That these [characters] conform surprisingly well to the general trends of French society of the time is such a deliberate goal of Balzac's successful project that for the sociologically minded reader the actual nonexistence of Rastignac, Rubempré, Vautrin, or Birotteau may appear to be a mere accident."³³³ One would only add to Pavel's reading that the ubiquity of the Revolution, along with its highly variable appearance and effects for so many diverse characters only deepens this sense of the real. Madame de la Chanterie should therefore be understood primarily through the lens of her experience during the Revolution, for besides the fact that someone such as she would have lived at this precise moment, under these general circumstances, it is the specific literary catalyst which plunges her first into despair, then shows us where this sort of despair can (and does) lead. The process that occurs is one where the past, as a sort of ethereal, metaphysical thing, grafts onto the present a certain residual substance which, without the context of backstory,

³³² *Ibid*, p. 412.

³³³ Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 105.

would be less definite and therefore appears ambiguous. According to Erich Auerbach, Balzac conceives “the present as history—the present as something in the process of resulting from history... People and atmospheres, contemporary as they may be, are always represented as phenomena sprung from historical events and forces.”³³⁴ Auerbach here suggests that history as it appears in the *Comédie* is deliberately entangled with the present, as though they were different forms of the same element; the present is consequently treated no less “historically” than the past. Franco Moretti understands Balzac’s engagement with history in similar terms, explaining, “the present becomes a sediment of history; while the past, instead of simply disappearing, turns into something visible, solid, *concrete*.”³³⁵ Neither Auerbach nor Moretti, in their respective analyses, identify memory as a critical element of Balzac’s dialogue with the past. But as we have seen, historical memory is the stream which often transports to the present this sediment of the past; backstory, meanwhile, is the most effective narrative tool with which to carry such information to its destination.

The living Revolution

Backstory in the Balzacian novel does not simply contextualize fictional characters by having them interact with—and live in the shadow of—their historical moment, but also by reimagining the interactions of fictional characters with—and their relations to—historical actors. This function of the *Comédie*’s engagement with the past is, however, far more problematic, for it requires the fictionalization of historical, “real” figures, as an inversion of the backstory motif, which has thus far involved only the pseudo-historicization of fictional characters. And while it is rare (with notable exceptions) that an historical figure has any significant role or is involved in a substantial dialogic or dramatic element of a novel, it is

³³⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 471; 473.

³³⁵ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, (Verso: New York, 2014), p. 92-3.

not uncommon in Balzac's works for his literary creations to mingle with such historical persons. Primarily in his earlier texts, Balzac adheres more closely to the "classical" model of the historical novel, where he takes a Scottian approach in his treatment of historical characters. This entails, as Georg Lukacs explains, constructing the "world-historical individual" as "a minor figure" who "only ever appears when the action is reaching its climax. His appearance is prepared by a broad picture of the times, which allows us to perceive, re-experience and understand this specific character of his significance."³³⁶ In *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, as we have discussed, the unnamed man is only revealed to be Sanson the executioner well into the text, whereafter his motives become more comprehensible; yet for much of the story his identity and purpose remain shrouded in mystery. This same motif appears in *Les Proscrits* and *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*, where in both cases the world-historical individuals remain somewhat vague or unknown until the texts near their ends. In the former, the mysterious poet is revealed to be none other than Dante Alighieri, although this piece of information is concealed until the work's final lines. *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*, meanwhile, follows a rather different course; we are introduced to the painter Nicolas Poussin before he has become a great artist, and even then, his identity is revealed by the signature on his painting.

The most idiosyncratic engagement with historical figures—and the historical past—in *La Comédie humaine* can, however, be found in Balzac's genre-defying *Sur Catherine de Médicis*. Spanning much of the preceding two centuries of France's history, the work presents three distinct *récits*, each of which focuses upon some aspect of the titular queen's life and, importantly, her influence and memory. Written years apart in 1841, 1836, and 1828, and later incorporated into the single work in 1842, *Le Martyr calviniste*, *La Confiance des Ruggieri*, and *Les deux rêves*, respectively, explore the *idea* of Catherine de Médicis, first as a contemporary, then in terms of her repute in the annals of French historical (and national)

³³⁶ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 128.

memory. Although at times structurally incoherent in its totality, reading more like an anthology of loosely related short stories than a single novel, there is a thematic glue which holds the work together; Nicole Cazauran has adeptly described it as akin to “les fragments d’une vaste fresque inachevée qui, au lieu d’être ébauchée de bout en bout, aurait ainsi pris forme et couleur par endroits seulement.”³³⁷ In spite of its inconsistencies, *Sur Catherine de Médicis* does maintain a certain philosophical unity, one which Balzac elucidates, in the most general terms, in the introduction. As he explains, “Si ce travail se trouve parmi les *Études philosophiques*, c’est qu’il montre l’esprit d’un temps et qu’on y voit clairement l’influence de la pensée.”³³⁸ More precisely, the three *récits* contribute as an ensemble towards a reassessment of the historical memory of one of France’s most complicated—and in the author’s view, misunderstood—figures.

The first two parts of the trilogy focus on the period of Catherine’s regency and its environs, reconstructing historical tableaux and the corresponding ideological-political atmosphere in a manner largely consistent with the realist literary precepts observed elsewhere in Balzac’s œuvre. In *Le Martyr calviniste* and *La Confiance des Ruggieri*, the author adapts many of the *Comédie*’s aesthetic and conceptual principles in service of a characteristic representation of the past. As Cazauran explains, “[Balzac] se fait archéologue pour poser ses décors et peindre les mœurs; chronique scrupuleux pour retracer les péripéties de la vie publique; “philosophe” aussi pour analyser les causes et les effets, pour éclairer à sa naissance l’esprit de la Réforme.”³³⁹ Catherine de Médicis, her historical milieu, and the religious strife of which both had become emblematic, are simultaneously recreated then interrogated, their memory traced across centuries, up to the moment which is of greatest interest to us in this study, the eve of the Revolution.

³³⁷ Balzac, *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, 11, p. 126.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 176.

³³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 163.

While the backstories we have already discussed in this chapter provide revolutionary genealogies of those characters in the *Comédie* for whom the Revolution was a formative event in their pasts, *Les Deux rêves*, the third installment of *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, is itself a backstory to the Revolution—a brief literary-philosophical exordium to the revolutionary careers of two of the period’s most consequential leaders. The archetype of revolutionary backstory which I have presented thus far is simply shifted back in time to 1786, in *Les Deux rêves*; Catherine de Médicis becomes a sort of philosophical lodestar for Robespierre and Marat, her reign a prelude, perhaps an inspiration, for the coming terror. As the title implies, Catherine appears first to Robespierre—who in a manner characteristic of the historical novel, is introduced simply as *l’avocat*, and referred to throughout as *l’inconnu*—in what he calls a dream, but it is more like a supernatural apparition. The two then engage in a sort of historical dialogue over Catherine’s actions, which Robespierre initially condemns as criminal, in accordance with his idealistic view of political power; it is important to remember that Robespierre was still a staunch opponent of capital punishment, certainly at this point in his life. The young lawyer is eventually persuaded, however, by the apparition’s polemic, coming to understand (however apprehensively) the queen’s actions as a necessary, rational exercise of power; “calme et froide comme la raison même.”³⁴⁰ Catherine presents a justification of political violence in her monologue, one which, as Courteix explains, “est... le propre de tout pouvoir authentique. En temps de révolution, elle [la violence] se trouve découplée lorsqu’elle est le fait d’adversaires qui refusent la tolérance et le pluralisme politiques et qui ont une conception totalitaire du pouvoir.”³⁴¹ The veracity of Catherine’s defense—which centers upon the claim that a drop of blood in 1572 could have spared the rivers of it that flowed, as a consequence in the subsequent centuries—seems to resonate with Robespierre, who is overcome and consumed by his encounter:

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

³⁴¹ René-Alexandre Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, (Paris, Presse Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 151.

Je sentis en moi comme un tressaillement intérieur. Je croyais respirer la fumée du sang de je ne sais quelles victimes. Catherine avait grandi. Elle était là comme un mauvais génie, et il me sembla qu'elle voulait pénétrer dans ma conscience pour s'y reposer.³⁴²

Robespierre's dream should, however, be read as an historical discourse; indeed, the discursive subtext of historical reassessment is critical to the work's main theme, namely the establishment of a link between Saint-Barthélemy and the Terror—and therefore, between Catherine and Robespierre—according to the premise that violence can be, and occasionally is, a rational and necessary exercise of political power. And although the connection is never made explicitly in *Les Deux rêves*—since Robespierre's dream occurs in 1786—Balzac does draw this parallel early in the introduction, arguing that “Les massacres de la Révolution répondent aux massacres de la Saint-Barthélemy. Le peuple devenu roi a fait contre la noblesse et le Roi ce que le Roi et la noblesse ont fait contre les insurgés du seizième siècle.”³⁴³ Through the interaction of these two periods, *Les Deux rêves* seeks to define and explain political violence in its ideal, to show that the exercise of such means is not necessarily arbitrary nor vengeful but can indeed be measured and precise.

The second (and shorter) of “les deux rêves”, that of Marat, presents an almost antithetical vision of politics; far more grotesque and profane than Robespierre's intriguing and nuanced anecdote, Marat's, which is less a dream than a lurid hallucination, is a reflection, among other things, of his physical ugliness, as the narrator remarks:

Je regardai... le chirurgien et j'éprouvai je ne sais quel sentiment d'horreur. Son teint terreux, ses traits à la fois ignobles et grands, offraient une expression exacte

³⁴² Balzac, *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, 11, p. 450.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 171.

de ce que vous me permettez de nommer *la canaille*. Quelques grains bleuâtres et noirs étaient semés sur son visage comme des traces de boue, et ses yeux lançaient une flamme sinistre.³⁴⁴

Marat's appearance, as detailed above in all its unpleasantness, reflects the ugliness of his thought, the profound contempt for humanity expressed in his vision. Absent the historical and philosophical depth of Robespierre's dream, *le chirurgien* instead views in the festering appendage of his patient an allegory for all humanity. While certainly more abstract than Robespierre's dream, it possesses none of his political idealism and subtlety, reducing humanity—or portions of it, in any case—to an infection which must, like the maggots in his patient's gangrenous leg, be extirpated.³⁴⁵ The visions of Robespierre and Marat, however different they may be, foreshadow their respective roles in the Revolution, as Balzac views them: the former as a flawed yet principled disciple of Rousseau, *l'Incorruptible*; the latter a miscreant—*une canaille*.

The fictionalized representation of historical figures in *Les Deux rêves* implies a mythical prerevolutionary backstory to these characters, and although it is at times excessively fantastical, the work is certainly not devoid of insight into the past. Concealed within the ostensibly supernatural hallucinations Balzac attempts a reconstruction of Robespierre and Marat's political thought, contextualized within the chronology of all French history. If the *Comédie* is a grand study of the Revolution's effects, *Sur Catherine de Médicis*—and *Les Deux rêves* in particular—is an inquiry into its causes and origins.

Les Deux rêves—along with the other early historical fictions mentioned in this chapter and the previous—does conform to Balzac's progression as an artist, from his emulation of the Scottian form, to historian of contemporary France. As Cazauran explains, “Avant le moment où il se tourna vers son siècle pour écrire “l’histoire des mœurs en action”, il y

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 455.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 456.

aurait eu le temps de longues et minutieuses études sur les “principaux règnes” et l’intention “d’écrire une histoire pittoresque de la France.”³⁴⁶ Balzac does not, of course, abandon all serious engagement with historical figures in his study of “mœurs en action”, although in contrast to the early “historical fictions”, he does find rather different uses for these figures as the *Comédie*’s focus shifts towards the present. The nature and purpose of these “world-historical” individuals undergoes a discernible transformation, not necessarily in terms of who is chosen for representation, but rather what sort of ecological niche such characters occupy, as figments of historical memory, in the decades following 1789.

Revolutionary figures, and the many references made to them, occupy a special, distinct place—like the Revolution itself—in the *Comédie*. Often appearing within the sorts of backstories discussed already in this chapter, they serve to further integrate Balzac’s fictional characters into the revolutionary milieu from which many of them emerged. Proximity to the Revolution, which is already established through backstory, is further emphasized by a character’s interaction with those infamous *historical* leaders of France’s most consequential period. Marat, Robespierre, Danton, the mere mention of these names bestows upon the text a precise sense of historicity which is more direct and explicit than the often generalized historical milieu of a backstory. That Vautrin’s aunt Jacqueline Collin had, for instance, been Marat’s mistress,³⁴⁷ offers relatively little insight into the mysterious Jacques Collin’s vague origins, but it does create an association between Vautrin and Marat, while provoking him to reveal childhood memories of his own. In other instances, the invocation of a name such as Marat’s has more immediate implications, as we see in *Illusions perdues*, where Lucien, after publishing a denunciation of d’Arthez’s book, is compared unfavorably to Marat—the inflammatory journalist of *l’Ami du peuple* infamy, rather than the revolutionary—who, Lucien is told by Finot, “est un saint comparé à vous.”³⁴⁸ References

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 127.

³⁴⁷ Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, 6, p. 753.

³⁴⁸ Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, 5, p. 533.

such as these are not arbitrary even when the information conveyed to the reader is of no great importance, for they communicate, at minimum, the universal recognition of revolutionary symbols in nineteenth-century French society. According to Patrick Berthier's tally, Robespierre's name appears approximately 49 distinct times in the *Comédie*.³⁴⁹ Sometimes, as in *Pierrette* (1840), the motif is utilized to signify certain personal characteristics, modes of dress, or something otherwise related to physical appearance and mannerism, as we see in the following description of Vinet: "Sa petite tête rusée était si bien peignée, son menton bien rasé lui donnait un air si mignard quoique froid, qu'il paraissait agréable dans le genre de Robespierre."³⁵⁰ Robespierre is invoked similarly in both *Une ténébreuse affaire* (1841) and *Les Employés* (1838); in the latter, the narrator introduces one of the novel's main characters, an aspiring *chef de division*, by focusing on his appearance, here his dress: "Rabourdin portait habituellement une grande redingote bleue, une cravate blanche, un gilet croisé à la Robespierre."³⁵¹ Comparisons in dress such as this do undoubtedly allude to a discernible cultural-historical signifier; fashion is, after all, rife with political symbolism and connotation. This point is made more explicitly in *La Vieille fille* (1836), where du Bousquier, whose career ascends during the Revolution, as "un des matadors de la finance" and a friend of Barras and Fouché, is then ostracized by Napoléon, leaving him resentful and nostalgic.³⁵² This nostalgia is reflected explicitly in his habiliment, which articulates an unwavering devotion to the Revolution and a specific admiration for

³⁴⁹ Patrick Berthier, 'Balzac et Robespierre', in *L'Année Balzacienne*, (Vendôme, Presses Universitaires de France: 1990), p. 29-50.

³⁵⁰ Balzac, *Pierrette*, 4, p. 120.

³⁵¹ Balzac, *Les Employés*, 7, p. 898-9. This exact phrasing is used elsewhere in the *Comédie*, notably to describe the dress of Michu in *Une ténébreuse affaire*: "Les quatre gentilshommes et Gothard se présentaient avec le costume qu'ils portaient lors de leur arrestation; mais Michu, dont les habits faisaient partie des pièces à conviction, avait mis ses meilleurs habits, une redingote bleue, un gilet de velours brun à la Robespierre... (italics mine)", Honoré de Balzac, *Une ténébreuse affaire*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981), 8, p. 655.

³⁵² Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, p. 364.

Robespierre: “Du Bousquier avait conservé le costume à la mode au temps de sa gloire: les bottes à revers, les bas de soie blancs, la culotte courte en drap côtelé de couleur cannelle, le gilet à la Robespierre et l’habit bleu.”³⁵³ According to Berthier, the most innocuous (and frequent) references to Robespierre are “celles de personnages portant... un même élément d’habillement”, but even such details as those which relate to a character’s appearance are not, as with du Bousquier, remotely incidental, for they reflect Robespierre’s integration into a postrevolutionary cultural zeitgeist that reaches well beyond his place in the historiography of the Revolution.³⁵⁴ That Balzac describes some aspect of a character—whether inconsequential or elemental—in terms which refer explicitly to the Revolution, is to recognize such imagery, like that evoked in the referential usage of Robespierre, as indicative of a set of universally intelligible symbols; in other words, as a monument of the national mythos.

As we see in du Bousquier, these references to Robespierre often communicate more important personal details of fictional characters than simply dress or physical appearance. In both *Ursule Mirouët* (1841) and *La Rabouilleuse*, for example, the Jacobin leader himself features prominently in the backstories of important characters, creating an intimate link between history and fiction. But the specter of Robespierre in these works is not merely that of a world-historical great man; Balzac transforms his memory into that of a mythological force of terror, whose mere presence—and in conformity to the Scottian literary tradition, his actual presence is limited—is never too far removed from the shadow of the guillotine. Indeed, we can see this conception of Robespierre as a harbinger of terror in the following, from the backstory of Doctor Minoret:

³⁵³ Balzac, *La vieille fille*, 4, p. 829.

³⁵⁴ Patrick Berthier, ‘Balzac et Robespierre’, in *L’Année Balzacienne*, (Vendôme, Presses Universitaires de France: 1990), p. 29.

Minoret connaissait intimement Robespierre, à qui jadis il fit avoir une médaille d'or pour une dissertation... Quoique, grâce à cette amitié, la femme du docteur pût ne rien craindre, elle eut si peur d'aller à l'échafaud que cette invincible terreur empira l'anévrisme qu'elle devait à une trop grande sensibilité. Malgré toutes les précautions que prenait un homme idolâtre de sa femme, Ursule rencontra la charrette pleine de condamnés où se trouvait précisément madame Roland, et ce spectacle causa sa mort. Minoret, plein de faiblesse pour son Ursule, à laquelle il ne refusait rien et qui avait mené la vie d'une petite maîtresse, se trouva presque pauvre après l'avoir perdue. Robespierre le fit nommer médecin en chef d'un hôpital.³⁵⁵

Balzac reconstructs here a tableau of the Terror which focuses less upon the historical representation of Robespierre and instead emphasizes the psychological effects of one's proximity to this incarnated totem of revolutionary violence. The atmospheric sense of dread which the author creates is constructed around the premise that Robespierre is some sort of omnipotent, calculated and unwavering autocrat. Although Minoret is rewarded for his virtuous commitment to the Republic—his 'friendship' with Robespierre does undoubtedly benefit his professional life—the cost of such a relationship is expectedly steep; the Doctor's wife dies of *Terreur*, the guillotine's (which is to say, Robespierre's) daunting silhouette is simply too much for her to bear.

However seamlessly Balzac transplants fictional persons into the otherwise undisturbed historical tableau, his recreation of historical figures inevitably necessitates some degree of adaptation and anachronism. Indeed, the very act of mythification in this regard requires that the author take certain artistic liberties. We see how this works in *Ursule Mirouët*, which offers a representation of Robespierre that is etched into the flashback; his

³⁵⁵ Balzac, *Ursule Mirouët*, 3, p. 784-5.

memorialization is therefore contingent upon a sort of micro-historical *mise en abîme*, an historical miniature within the fictional universe. Playing upon a traumatic scene that centers around the man's haunting specter, Robespierre's villainy is almost comical, ironic in its embellishment, since he does nothing but assist Minoret, yet the latter still suffers as a result. This construction adheres to the idea that Robespierre is one of history's "great men", but exaggerates the implications of greatness in this context, by suggesting that the mention of his name alone could frighten someone to death. His usage here implores a discourse on historical memory, for this representation focuses primarily on reactions to an idea of Robespierre; in some sense he is statuesque, an icon or facsimile of himself, transposed onto the historical tableau from the imaginations of his contemporaries.

In *La Rabouilleuse* we see a similar representation of the historical Robespierre. When we first encounter Descoings, *beau-père* of the previously mentioned Doctor Rouget, he faces condemnation by Robespierre personally; the great man no longer terrorizes out of view but now participates in Balzac's rewriting of the Revolution. Descoings, we are told, "fut incarcéré sur un mot de Robespierre à Fouquier-Tinville."³⁵⁶ Formally arrested for *accaparement*, his true crime is far more grave, and described as follows: "Descoings, qui eut l'imprudence de croire la famine factice, eut la sottise de communiquer son opinion (il pensait que les opinions étaient libres) à plusieurs de ses clients et clientes, tout en les servant."³⁵⁷ Guilty in actuality of *lèse-majesté*, Descoings is imprisoned and sentenced to death, at which point he becomes the scene's other historical great man:

Si Descoings périt, il eut du moins la gloire d'aller à l'échafaud en compagnie d'André de Chénier. Là, sans doute, l'Épicerie et la Poésie s'embrassèrent pour la première fois en personne, car elles avaient alors et auront toujours des relations secrètes. La mort de Descoings produisit beaucoup plus de sensation que celle

³⁵⁶ Balzac, *La Rabouilleuse*, 4, p. 274.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

d'André de Chénier. Il a fallu trente ans pour reconnaître que la France avait perdu plus à la mort de Chénier qu'à celle de Descoings. La mesure de Robespierre eut cela de bon que, jusqu'en 1830, les épiciers effrayés ne se mêlèrent plus de politique.³⁵⁸

In contrast to Descoings, who ascends to the status of revolutionary martyr, Robespierre is ultimately belittled by the narrator in this flashback, where he is referred to variously as “Roberspierre” and, somewhat facetiously, as *Maximilien Ier*. These slights are not necessarily meant to completely diminish Robespierre but to deconstruct the extant mythos, then to supplant it with the exaltation of Descoings. Robespierre becomes glib, petty, human in other words, while Descoings, merely a man at the outset, becomes a revolutionary monument.

Conclusion

The incorporation of revolutionary figures into the *Comédie*, like we have seen with Robespierre and Marat, conveys critical information about both the fictional characters with whom they have interacted, as well as the broader society for which the appearance or invocation of such revolutionary symbols are rarely (if ever) coincidental. Balzac's nineteenth century is so conspicuously reimagined as an effect and continuation of the Revolution that protracted digressions on its lingering presence are rarely necessary and would in any case have been redundant for the average contemporary reader, who would have had little difficulty discerning most of these allusions or references to the Revolution and the author's nuanced intentions behind their inclusion. We have seen how this works with backstories, and consequently how these past experiences can influence circumstances and behaviors, even decades later. Returning for a moment to Du Bousquier's *gilet à la*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 275.

Robespierre, it is important to understand that its implications transcend his personal adherence to a political idea, for the act indicates to both reader and importantly, to his own society, the existence of Robespierre as an icon of revolutionary memory, indeed someone worthy of memorialization. In this instance the signifier and signified are harmonious and unproblematic; Du Bousquier's costume reflects both a precise statement of political sentiment and an expression of personal nostalgia—a flashback to his revolutionary origins—so its incorporation into the novel says as much about his personal decision to emulate Robespierre by displaying such a symbol as it does about the ubiquity of the symbol itself. This sort of visual representation is effective because of its verisimilitude and discernability, i.e. that someone like Du Bousquier would express his sentiments in such a manner, and that his proclamation would be understood by the audience for whom it was intended. A similar act of invocation is undertaken in *Une ténébreuse affaire*, where the novel's protagonist, Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, adorns herself in the memory of another of the Revolution's notable figures, Charlotte Corday, although not simply by emulating her dress or appearance, but rather by appropriating, and then channeling, the very spirit of her actions.

Published in 1841, *Une ténébreuse affaire* is one of Balzac's last historical fictions, set between 1803-6 and loosely based on *l'affaire Clément de Ris*, a royalist conspiracy to depose Napoleon. When we first encounter the novel's aristocratic heroine, Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, at what remains of her familial estate in Arcis—a commune in the Aube—she has recently inherited the responsibilities and titles of the Cinq-Cygne name:

Laurence, était, contrairement à la loi salique, héritière du nom, des armes et des fiefs... Laurence était donc comtesse de Cinq-Cygne, son mari devait prendre et son nom et son blason où se lisait pour devise la sublime réponse faite par l'aînée des cinq sœurs à la sommation de rendre le château: *Mourir en chantant!* Digne de

ces belles héroïnes, Laurence possédait une blancheur qui semblait être une gageure du hasard.³⁵⁹

Already in her introduction into the novel we see the many contradictions in Laurence's character, the circumvention of French inheritance law which bestows upon her the title of *comtesse* being perhaps the least interesting of her life's many idiosyncrasies. Although not totally out of place for the historical moment in which we find her, neither does Laurence typify a woman of her time. On the one hand, as Balzac explains, she is conceptualized according to a Scottian female archetype: "Quiconque a lu le beau roman de *Rob-Roy* doit se souvenir d'un des rares caractères de femme pour la conception duquel Walter Scott soit sorti de ses habitudes de froideur, de Diana Vernon."³⁶⁰ Perhaps the most important aspect of Scott's influence here is the relationship Laurence has with her historical moment; much like Diana Vernon, whose character is inseparable from the Jacobite Rising, Laurence can only be understood within a postrevolutionary context, for as the very next sentence reveals to us, Laurence is constructed—and indeed, she fashions herself—in the image of *l'ange de l'assassinat*, Charlotte Corday. "Ce souvenir" Balzac explains, "peut servir à faire comprendre Laurence, si vous ajoutez aux qualités de la chasseresse écossaise l'exaltation contenue de Charlotte Corday."³⁶¹

These parallel descriptions of Laurence in imagery and exposition, that is, the author's method of describing her, along with her diegetic self-fashioning, present us with a converging memory of the Revolution, one which assumes the role of myth. In this regard, then, Laurence creates a type of meta-legend within the text; Balzac tells us that he models Laurence in the image of Charlotte Corday, yet she has already established this fact by the deliberate act of hanging a portrait of Marat's assassin in her salon: "Aussi mit-elle

³⁵⁹ Balzac, *Une ténébreuse affaire*, 8, p. 534.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 536.

³⁶¹ *Ibid*.

audacieusement dans son pauvre salon de Cinq-Cygne le portrait de Charlotte Corday, couronné de petites branches de chêne tressées.”³⁶² The painting’s placement in the salon tells us a great deal about Laurence, and about Balzac; the former, who fancies herself an avowed enemy of the tyrannical First Consul, chooses the painting of Corday to signify an historical precedent to her indispensable role in the burgeoning conspiracy. For Laurence, we find the spirit of this revolutionary icon has been internalized, especially, in terms of its contradicting parts; she doubtless has a great deal of admiration for Corday—enough to have her portrait adorn a salon which is otherwise in a state of decline—yet as a royalist Laurence must (and indeed, does) reject even the most moderate republicanism, which would include the Girondin assassin.³⁶³ What then is Balzac attempting to show us in this scene? We might say that Laurence chooses to appropriate a figure from the Revolution in a counter-historical manner, or indeed, that she has mythologized Corday according to her own interpretation and sensibilities. The author relies on the reference to Corday as a corollary to his protagonist’s zealotry, her intransigent, even self-destructive devotion to this singular ambition. As the narrator explains,

Laurence ne pensait qu’au renversement de Bonaparte, dont l’ambition et le triomphe avaient excité chez elle comme une rage, mais une rage froide et calculée. Ennemie obscure et inconnue de cet homme couvert de gloire, elle le visait, du fond de sa vallée et de ses forêts, avec une fixité terrible, elle voulait parfois aller le tuer aux environs de Saint-Cloud ou de la Malmaison.³⁶⁴

This passage so brilliantly assimilates the very spirit of Corday into Laurence, establishing a mythhistorical significance around the portrait and linking two moments in the recent

³⁶² *Ibid*, p. 535.

³⁶³ For a discussion of how Balzac uses objects which evoke some image or idea of the past more generally, see: Marta Caraion, *Comment la littérature pense les objets*, (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020), p. 401-8.

³⁶⁴ Balzac, *Une ténébreuse affaire*, 8, p. 538.

past—July 1793, when Corday laid her plot to assassinate Marat, and 1803, when we meet Laurence hatching one of her own. In his own subtle way, then, Balzac gives a contemporary significance to the past, infusing it with a mythological vitality.

The contemporaneity of this revolutionary memory derives its resonance from Laurence's reimagination of Corday according to her self-image, and of course the author's conception of her; the historical Charlotte Corday is stripped, by omission, of her republicanism (Corday's politics are never mentioned), or at least reduced to apoliticality, a generalized symbol of virtuous political violence. Those elements of her image which most closely align with Laurence—notably Corday's feminine beauty which, as we shall discuss more in the next chapter, functions as a mask for her violent fury, and is well attested by contemporaneous sources—give the countess de Cinq-Cygne the very same allure and mystique as many nineteenth-century representations of Corday. Laurence's appearance, as Balzac explains, conceals an amazonian disposition:

La virago se cachait sous la forme la plus féminine et la plus faible en apparence. Son cœur était d'une excessive sensibilité, mais elle portait dans sa tête une résolution virile et une fermeté stoïque. Ses yeux clairvoyants ne savaient pas pleurer. À voir son poignet blanc et délicat nuancé de veines bleues, personne n'eût imaginé qu'il pouvait défier celui du cavalier le plus endurci. Sa main, si molle, si fluide, maniait un pistolet, un fusil, avec la vigueur d'un chasseur exercé. Au dehors, elle n'était jamais autrement coiffée que comme les femmes le sont pour monter à cheval, avec un coquet petit chapeau de castor et le voile vert rabattu. Aussi son visage si délicat, son cou blanc, enveloppé d'une cravate noire, n'avaient ils jamais souffert de ses courses en plein air.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 537-8.

Although Corday is never mentioned in this description, it nevertheless reaffirms her significance as an historical inspiration for Laurence, as well as an archetype from which the author constructs her character. If the implicit similarities here are uncanny, it is because Laurence was initially conceptualized not simply as a Corday-esque femme fatale, but essentially as a simulacrum (and contemporary) of her. This can likely be explained by the author's intention, in early drafts, to commence the novel's action a decade prior during the Revolution, around the time that Corday assassinated Marat. According to René Courteix, Laurence places the portrait of Charlotte Corday in her salon so as to terrify all tyrants with the prospect of political assassination. Interestingly, as Courteix explains, the message is directed at Robespierre most of all, for "dans un premier projet d'*Une ténébreuse affaire*, Laurence envisage de tuer [Robespierre] (mais Balzac y renonce au nom de la vraisemblance historique), puis Bonaparte, aussi illégitime aux yeux de Laurence que Robespierre mais plus dangereux pour les monarchistes."³⁶⁶ What makes the Corday reference even more interesting in its finished context, in 1803 rather than 1793-4, is that the ten years of diegetic time which separates her from Laurence—and the half-century that separates her from Balzac—suggests to us as Courteix notes, that Corday has become an idealized symbol of political assassination, a myth which, as we shall see, has precedent throughout nineteenth-century French literature, and was alive and well when Balzac wrote it.

³⁶⁶ Courteix, *Balzac et la Révolution française*, p. 185.

Chapter 5. “Une femme d’une nature rare et supérieure”: Charlotte Corday and the Construction of a Revolutionary Myth

Ces morts de femmes étaient terribles... Celle de Charlotte Corday, sublime, intrépide et calme, commença une religion

-Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*

Introduction

The portrait of Charlotte Corday appears in *Une ténébreuse affaire* not as an arcane reference to the French Revolution, but rather as an immediately discernible emblem, from the recent past, of some ideal of courage and virtue. Her image, placed so deliberately on the wall of this salon, has come to symbolize a distinct type of character to such an extent that the mere invocation of the name Corday—or better, her portrait—in Balzac’s novel tells us a great deal about Laurence de Cinq-Cygne. Yet it also reflects the broader importance of symbols, of physical objects, as instruments of representation in a so-called “realist” aesthetics. The painting of Corday functions first as an innocuous item in the material world of *La Comédie humaine*, although it quickly attains greater importance, because it does not merely exist, but performs a sort of semiotic labor. By placing Corday at the center of this scene, Laurence affirms a congruity between herself and that which is represented by the object. Balzac, meanwhile, is tasked with ensuring the symbol’s legibility; author and character both engage here with the selfsame project of memorialization, although for Laurence the memory is evoked as a function of, or response to, her violent contempt for tyranny in all its forms. It is essential that Balzac, as the *chef d’orchestre*, ensure the explicit, textual coherence of the reference—Laurence must be the “type” who would have such a portrait in her salon—as well as the implicit, extratextual congruities between Laurence and the historical Charlotte Corday; he has the dual task of a

novelist and cultural historian. In other words, Laurence communicates, in 1800, through a repurposed memento of 1793, which Balzac in turn transcribes (with the minor addition of a reference to Scott's *Rob Roy* as a sort of Rosetta Stone) into a fully comprehensible evocation of the Revolution and its legacy, to his readers in 1841.

The portrait of Corday articulates a meaning which is most clearly understood in its nineteenth-century French context; a *monumentalisation* (or *patrimonialisation*) of a certain image, the effect of which is a transformation—in this case Corday and Laurence are both transformed; they act to transform each other—into forms more legible, discernible, and *historical* to the contemporary reader. The process effectively signals meaning between historical symbols and their literary representations, thus establishing the phenomenon that Judith Lyon-Caen describes in her work *La griffe du temps*. As Lyon-Caen explains, “pour que les textes écrits dans le passé appartiennent à notre présent, il faut quantité de gestes et d’actions, parfois ténus, qui effectuent une transmission.”³⁶⁷ Paintings, along with other types of visual representation, effectively convey meaning beyond the image itself, as part of a broader “nouvelle culture du regard” so common in realist fictions of the 1830s onward.³⁶⁸ To demonstrate this theory in practice, Lyon-Caen refers us to Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly’s use, in *Les Diaboliques* (1874), of the color yellow as both long established historical symbol—“Couleur aimée des jeunes Romaines”—and as a euphemism for prostitution in the text.³⁶⁹ *La robe jaune* thus signifies a similar continuum between history, literary text, and social milieu as that which we find with Laurence’s painting.

Indeed, it is not always left up to visual representations to evoke such imagery; it may suffice simply to mention a particular name from the past, as in Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1838), where Clélia Conti invokes Corday in a moment of her own discernibly “female” rage: “moi, j’irais poignarder le prince, comme l’héroïque Charlotte Corday.” And

³⁶⁷ Judith Lyon-Caen, *La griffe du temps*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), p. 14.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 139.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 126.

though the prince to whom Clélia refers—unlike Napoleon, whom Laurence plans to assassinate—is not himself a real (that is to say, an “historical” figure), Clélia and Laurence reference Corday, in name or in likeness, *mutatis mutandis*, for much the same reason; as though to preface or qualify one’s intent to kill with such an invocation signals that their furor is virtuous and peculiarly feminine, complete with its own historical-cultural roots, its own mythology, the development of which is the focus of this chapter.

Neither would we assume that such references to Corday are adventitious or slapdash on the part of the authors. For Stendhal more specifically, Corday represents a sort of historical ideal as well as one of his personal political heroes, less for what she did than for those virtues which motivated her to act. According to Francesco Manzini, Stendhal’s conception of Corday is that she is a ‘quixotic dupe’, “made sublime by the values that underpin [her] deluded aspirations.”³⁷⁰ Stendhal’s admiration for Corday bears out in more explicitly personal terms in the autobiographical work *Vie de Henry Brulard*, where the young Henry, repulsed by all manifestations of tyranny, recalls etching the names of royal assassins into his writing desk, an action which he explains as having been inspired by Corday: “Peut-être avais-je été conduit à faire ma liste d’assassins par l’action de Charlotte Corday—11 ou 12 juillet 1793—dont j’étais fou.”³⁷¹ Perhaps Stendhal, who only abandoned work on *Henry Brulard* sometime in 1836, was compelled to include this detail at least partly in light of the spectacular attempt to assassinate Louis-Philippe in July of that year. One of at least seven made on the king’s life during his reign, it is an event which the author discusses at length in his 1835 correspondence with the Duc de Broglie.³⁷²

Whatever Stendhal’s and Balzac’s reasons for including Corday’s name as they do, both references presuppose that their readership will grasp its meaning, not simply recognize the name; Corday appears at the intersection, in other words, of history and

³⁷⁰ Francesco Manzini, *Stendhal’s Parallel Lives*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 103-4.

³⁷¹ Stendhal, ‘*Vie de Henry Brulard*’, *Œuvres intimes*, 2 vols., ed. by Victor Del Litto (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 2, p. 207.

³⁷² It is likely that this chapter was written sometime in December of 1835, if not a few months later.

memory. The two may run parallel, at times they may function symbiotically, but they are not interchangeable constructs; Pierre Nora summarizes this important distinction of terms in the introduction to the first volume of *Les Lieux de mémoire*:

Mémoire, histoire: loin d'être synonymes, nous prenons conscience que tout les oppose. La mémoire est la vie, toujours portée par des groupes vivants et à ce titre, elle est en évolution permanente, ouverte à la dialectique du souvenir et de l'amnésie, inconsciente de ses déformations successives, vulnérable à toutes les utilisations et manipulations, susceptible de longues latences et de soudaines revitalisations. L'histoire est la reconstruction toujours problématique et incomplète de ce qui n'est plus. La mémoire est un phénomène toujours actuel, un lien vécu au présent éternel; l'histoire, une représentation du passé.³⁷³

Nora's definitions express with broad strokes one of this chapter's principal concerns: to better understand how the memory and historiography of Charlotte Corday were mutually engaged with each other, from 1793 to roughly 1850. While largely deferring to Nora's thesis in general terms, namely that there are important differences between *mémoire* and *histoire*—that the latter is ultimately distinct from the former—in this chapter I will explore whether they must remain so oppositional, agonistic even, as presented by Nora:

La mémoire installe le souvenir dans le sacré, l'histoire l'en débusque, elle prosaïse toujours... La mémoire s'enracine dans le concret, dans l'espace, le geste, l'image et l'objet. L'histoire ne s'attache qu'aux continuités temporelles, aux évolutions et aux rapports des choses. La mémoire est un absolu et l'histoire ne connaît que le

³⁷³ Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1997) I (3 vols.), p. 24-5.

relatif...La mémoire est toujours suspecte à l'histoire, dont la mission vraie est de la détruire et de la refouler. *L'histoire est délégitimation du passé vécu.*³⁷⁴

What makes Charlotte Corday a particularly useful and interesting study of the crossroads, at which memory and history meet? How do these two concepts operate, in tandem and indeed, in defiance of each other, to create out of Corday the symbol we find in Balzac, in Stendhal, and in the other works we shall discuss in this chapter? To arrive at the Charlotte Corday who is referenced in *Une ténébreuse affaire* and *La Chartreuse de Parme*—as a symbol, or even an icon—however, Corday first had to endure decades of rumor, misogyny, and of *oubli*; of infamy and of obsolescence; of *flux* and of *reflux*, to borrow the latter terms from Guillaume Mazeau's illuminating study of Corday, *Le Bain de l'histoire*.

By 1841 Charlotte Corday was already amidst an apotheosis, an ascent towards a memory *plus grand que Brutus*.³⁷⁵ In this chapter we shall explore Corday's Odyssey, her emergence from obscurity in 1793 onto the world-historical stage, her short public life, and meandering afterlife. Before discussing the Corday mythos, to which we have thus far only alluded, however, it is important that we recount those July days in 1793, when her name was permanently engraved in French history.

13 July (1793)

While it is not my intention in this chapter to relitigate the historical assassination of Marat, it is nevertheless important to provide at the outset a brief account of 13 July 1793, for the sake of context for what follows.³⁷⁶ Corday's life and legacy, as is true of all famous assassins, quickly became inseparable from that of her victim. It is of course impossible to

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 25.

³⁷⁵ This phrase appears with some frequency in nineteenth-century works about Corday, most famously in Alphonse Esquiros' biographical novel *Charlotte Corday*, a text discussed later in the chapter.

³⁷⁶ My account relies primarily on the work of Jacques Guilhameau and Guillaume Mazeau.

meaningfully discuss Brutus without Caesar, or John Wilkes Booth without Lincoln; the same is undoubtedly the case with regard to Charlotte Corday and Jean-Paul Marat. The dynamics which motivate such assassins to resort to grave acts of violence, whether they be political, personal, or otherwise, is anterior to any greater understanding of the assassin and her enduring memory that we might hope to gain.

Two days prior to the assassination, Marie-Anne Charlotte Corday d'Armont—known as Charlotte Corday—arrived in Paris, where she took up quarters at a hotel located at no. 17, rue des Vieux-Augustins, not far from Marat's residence at 18 rue des Cordeliers. Corday had originally intended to assassinate Marat at the Convention Nationale, in a spectacle meant to be witnessed by the entire revolutionary government, although this proved impossible as Marat was unwell and confined for the most part to the bathtub, which would eventually be the scene of his murder. Thus, Corday sent a series of letters to Marat, in an attempt to secure a meeting with him. Corday then purchased a black hilted knife, which she is alleged to have concealed, as subsequent accounts so conspicuously note, between her breasts.³⁷⁷ Having received no response to her letters, Corday arrived at Marat's home early on the evening of 13 July and was finally allowed to see him, where she found him in a pungent bath of water and vinegar, ailing from what has been described as a sort of leprous skin condition. Corday then recited to Marat a list of names—those of supposed anti-Revolutionary conspirators—in the hope that such information would goad him into levying de facto death sentences, which perhaps was for Corday a sort of final justification. Marat of course obliged, thus proving himself to be the monstrous demagogue Corday had expected; she then plunged the knife into Marat's chest, killing him almost instantly. Making no attempt at evading capture, Corday was detained, interrogated, tried, and on 17 July 1793, executed. These, then, are the bare details of Charlotte Corday's

³⁷⁷ This detail is included in many nineteenth-century histories of the Revolution, though notably, in Lamartine's *Histoire des Girondins*: "elle tire de son sein le couteau et le plonge, avec une force surnaturelle, jusqu'au manche dans le cœur de Marat." See: Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2014) II (2 vols), p. 1437.

assassination of Marat. Political responses were immediate, though the effects were at least of equal consequence in the popular, and indeed cultural reactions. Summarizing the former, Jacques Guilhaumou explains that the public's sentiment—particularly among the *sans-culottes*—was one utterly consumed by the idea of vengeance, whether this meant killing Brissot and the other Girondins in retaliation, or executing Marie-Antoinette, *la femme Capet*.³⁷⁸

The memorialization of Marat began almost instantaneously, before even the first signs of *rigor mortis* had set in. By this one refers to his literal (and figurative) pantheonization, a project largely orchestrated by the painter Jacques-Louis David, along with the architect and mason Pierre-François Palloy. (Fig. 1)³⁷⁹ The public spectacle was of a discernibly pagan nature; Marat's corpse, displayed on a dais for public viewing, was an image with striking similarity to David's *Les Funérailles de Patrocle* (1778).³⁸⁰ (Fig. 2) It was also reported that the fatal wound continued to bleed, for days after his death; evidently Marat's apotheosis, despite its authors' appeals to Paganism, was not without a certain Christian symbolism. The truth, however, was that the corpse was rapidly decaying in the July heat, presenting a significant challenge to David's plan.³⁸¹ According to one journalist's first-hand account, written on 16 July, "Malgré l'embaumement, des exhalaisons putrides se faisaient fortement sentir; on a même été obligé de blanchir la peau du visage et de la partie du corps qu'on a mise à découvert pour que la vue en fût supportable."³⁸² Jacques Guilhaumou describes the scene in Paris as both frenzied and impassioned, the people quickly rallying around their fallen hero. As the flesh of *l'Ami du peuple* continued to fester,

³⁷⁸ Jacques Guilhaumou, *La Mort de Marat*, (Brussels: Complexe, 1989), pp. 48-9.

³⁷⁹ Images can be found in Appendix 1.

³⁸⁰ See: David Lloyd Dowd, 'Art as national propaganda in the French Revolution', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15 (1951), pp. 532-46.

³⁸¹ Guilhaumou, *La Mort de Marat*, p. 52.

³⁸² *Ibid*, p. 53.

he began a transformation into memory; into an ostensibly eternal representation of the nation and its patriotic citizens:

Le corps de la République assimilé au corps de Marat est atteint dans ses fondements; il continue à se décomposer, par l'effet de la putréfaction, sous les yeux du peuple. Seul un immense mouvement d'adhésion, de sympathie et d'enthousiasme en faveur de Marat mort peut permettre, dans cette situation paradoxale, la mise en sublime, l'héroïsation totale de l'Ami du peuple. Ainsi le corps de la République retrouvera son intégrité.³⁸³

Marat's spirit, then, was quickly absorbed into both the body politic and the broader social zeitgeist of 1793. Over 50,000 people attended his funeral, although neither Robespierre nor Danton was among them; the former, though, seized upon the opportunity, to appropriate the assassination for his own ends. In a speech to the Convention, Robespierre warned that those same knives which pierced Marat's flesh would soon come for him. This, it seems, was a reasonable concern, for Corday was explicit with her interrogators, expressing as a motive the hope that her act would deter, even endanger, those other Marats: "Croyez-vous donc avoir tué tous les Marat?" to which she responded, "Celui-là mort, les autres auront peur, peut-être." The possibility that her actions might inspire other enemies of the Revolution was motive enough to "forget" her name, and to some extent, the entire ordeal. A similar and largely successful project had been undertaken six months prior, following the killing of Louis-Michel le Peletier by a member of the *Garde du Corps* named Philippe Nicolas Marie de Pâris, to purge the assassin's name from public memory. It was necessary, therefore, that Corday disappear likewise. As Mazeau explains,

³⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 57.

“il faut à tout prix rendre cet événement invisible pour qu’il ne menace pas la Victoire imminente des Montagnards.”³⁸⁴

Perhaps of comparable importance to the political concerns surrounding Corday, misogyny played a significant role in the vitriol which was directed at her memory. The Marquis de Sade, who was certainly no champion of women’s causes, captured the mélange of bafflement and contempt that many harbored for Corday in his polemical *Discours aux mânes de Marat et de Le Pelletier*, where he refers to her as follows: “Le barbare assassin de Marat, semblable à ces êtres mixtes auxquels on ne peut pas assigner aucun sexe, vomi par les enfers pour le désespoir de tous les deux, n’appartient directement à aucun.”³⁸⁵ Sade’s *Discours* reveals a visceral anxiety, one which identifies Corday as “emasculator or castrater.” According to Helen Weston, such fear was part of a larger concern that this sort of emasculation could return France to the *Ancien Régime* hierarchy of masculinity, where the king was held up as the sole representative thereof, “surrounded by slavish, effeminized courtiers.”³⁸⁶ It should therefore come as little surprise to hear such vitriol from Sade, who was, besides all socio-political concerns, an admirer of Marat. Yet even among those for whom Corday was a heroic figure, or who at least tried to assess her life fairly, it was difficult to reconcile her sex with such a masculine act of violence. Thus Corday, who by all accounts acted alone and of her own free will, was suspected of being a mere tool of some broader conspiracy, a Girondin Fury, or at least of having been driven by the uncontrollable throes of feminine passion; her unmarried status was scrutinized, as was her apparent virginity, which David is alleged to have confirmed himself during her autopsy.³⁸⁷ Corday’s sex remained a critical component of her memory throughout the nineteenth century, and

³⁸⁴ Guillaume Mazeau, *Le bain de l’histoire: Charlotte Corday et l’attentat contre Marat 1793-2009*, (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2009), p. 33.

³⁸⁵ Marquis de Sade, *Discours prononcé à la Fête décernée par la Section des Piques, aux mânes de Marat et de Le Pelletier, par Sade, citoyen de cette section, et membre de la Société populaire*, (1793).

³⁸⁶ Helen Weston, ‘The Corday-Marat Affair’, Helen Weston, William Vaughan (eds.) *David’s Death of Marat*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 137.

³⁸⁷ See: Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*, p. 100.

since it was almost exclusively men who shaped her image during this period—with a notable exception in Louise Colet, to whom we shall return—it is unsurprising that she is often reduced to sexist tropes, if not outright misogynistic contempt, or at the very least a manner of objectification inherent in the male gaze.

Certainly at this early juncture, immediately after Marat's assassination, Corday was represented primarily in the form of engravings and etchings, which include her portrait as well as scenes of the event, from the assassination to her execution. Many of these images were later catalogued and annotated by Charles Vatel, in his *Charlotte Corday et les Girondins*.³⁸⁸ (Figs. 3 & 4) Unsurprisingly, paintings were another, perhaps the most important medium by which Corday was memorialized; most famously, the German painter Jean-Jacques Hauer took her portrait in the cell as she awaited execution. (Fig. 5) This was the archetypal painting of Corday, one of the only for which we are certain she sat—upon which most others from the period are based—and it is possible this was the same image that would have hung in Laurence de Cinq-Cygne's fictional Salon. Hauer also painted a rather crude, almost cartoonish scene from the assassination, of the dying Marat in his bathtub while his assassin stands behind him (unlike in David's painting of the same scene), knife in hand. (Fig. 6) Finally, newspapers, journals and diary entries express particularly fascinating personal, and generally first-hand accounts, often presenting us with the unfiltered minutes of Marat's death and, importantly, of Corday's execution. Jacques-René Hébert's notorious publication *Le Père Duchesne*, for example, echoed Sade's contempt for Corday; referring to her as *une garce du Calvados*, the sensationalist broadsheet recounts Marat's death with all the partisan furor one might expect from this exemplar of the low-life of revolutionary pamphleteering.³⁸⁹ It was primarily through these ostensible first-hand accounts that various rumors and legends emerged, for instance, that after having been

³⁸⁸ Charles Vatel, *Charlotte Corday et les Girondins*, (Paris: Henri Plon, 1864-1872) III (3 vols.). See also: Guillaume Mazeau, *Corday contre Marat: Deux siècles d'images*, (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2009).

³⁸⁹ Jacques-René Hébert, *Le Père Duchesne*, No. 260 (1793).

decapitated, Corday's body was desecrated by a man among the crowd of spectators, a carpenter named Legros, who jumped onto the platform, seized Corday's head and slapped her cheek, which resulted in a momentary blush; the story has long since been discredited, but did persist for some time after Corday's execution.³⁹⁰

Personal accounts were by no means exclusively fabrications or embellishments, nor did they necessarily engender anti-Corday propaganda. Of course, Corday had her admirers among the Gironde and counter-Revolution, though many disillusioned Republicans as well viewed her immediately as a symbol of courageous resistance in the face of an ascendant cabal of radicals. Most famous among these early devotees was the German-born revolutionary, Adam Lux. Like Corday, Lux emerged from obscurity after witnessing the former's execution, which had such a profound effect on him that he became nothing short of what we must call a Cordayist. Although he had time to write only two pamphlets before his own arrest and execution, Lux represents in many ways the spirit of what Michelet would later refer to as *la religion du poignard*; the cult of Corday. According to Guillaume Mazeau, Lux's encounter with Corday, as she marched to the scaffold had an immediate, life-altering impact; it was "une expérience mystique et amoureuse", one that would embolden his own opposition to the radicalization of his former political friends, leading him to the guillotine only a few months later.³⁹¹

Experiences such as that of Jean-Jacques Hauer, whose only enduring work is that of Corday, or of Adam Lux, who offered up his own life in an act of emulation after witnessing Corday's execution, reflect the spiritual and existential effects of the French Revolution on the personal lives and vocations of individuals. In her article "The World We Have Gained:

³⁹⁰ Most modern historians, at least, dismiss the blush, while many others dispute the slap as well. It does however seem likely that a man named Legros did inappropriately defile Corday's corpse, by lifting her head up in front of the crowd. Some nineteenth-century historians, notably Lamartine, still include the slap in the narration of events. See, for example: Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins*, II (2 vols.), p. 1457.

³⁹¹ Mazeau, *Le bain de l'histoire*, p. 154. See also: Stefan Zweig, *Adam Lux: dix tableaux de la vie d'un révolutionnaire allemand*, trans. By Olivier Mannoni, (Paris: Payot, 2021).

The Future of The French Revolution”, Lynn Hunt describes the Revolution (and revolutions per se) as, first and foremost experiential. By this Hunt means that the Revolution was a subjective experience, that it “alter[ed] the mental state of millions of people.”³⁹² The immediate reactions to Charlotte Corday’s assassination of Marat certainly support Hunt’s thesis, as evidenced in Hauer’s paintings, and by Lux’s self-immolation. In the aftermath of the assassination, during the days and months which followed, such responses and reactions crystalized into more deliberate representations, notably, as we shall subsequently discuss, in the work of Jacques-Louis David and André Chénier.

The Painter and the Poet

Notable early representations of Corday, beginning with Jacques-Louis David’s *Marat assassiné* and André Chénier’s ‘À Charlotte Corday’, bestow upon their respective subjects a similar sense of historical consciousness, while affirming the very essence of what Nora means with his expression *souvenir du sacré*. Corday’s conspicuous erasure from David’s tableau, her monumental ubiquity in Chénier’s verse, reveal to us a great deal about history and memory in the immediate aftermath of Marat’s assassination; we shall now discuss those revelations. It is important, however, to first address the problematics inherent to any discussion which endeavors to cross the bounds of genre, and in this case, of medium. Taking for granted the obvious, banal differences between visual artist and writer—it suffices to say that one paints, the other writes—the expressive tools which the painter and poet have at their disposal differ considerably. Rather than assessing the works solely, or even principally on their aesthetic merits, which would only exploit these differences, we are interested in better understanding what each has to say about their subject, and how they go about saying it. They are each historical artifacts—relics of 1793—both of which express

³⁹² Lynn Hunt, ‘The world we have gained: the future of the French Revolution’, *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), p. 3.

a deliberate historical consciousness and, perhaps, a less intentional (although no less salient) process of discursive, or even polemic mythmaking.³⁹³ What, for example, can we learn about Charlotte Corday, how she was remembered and regarded in 1793, on the margins of David's painting, that may be lost in Chénier's poem? In what ways do these two works contribute to the formation of a "myth of Charlotte Corday" which crystalizes during the subsequent half century? Even a painting with as much historical awareness as David's must inevitably restrain itself in what it shows, lest it sacrifice coherence for the sake of comprehensiveness. In fact, it is by the very omission, and revision, of certain historical facts that David's painting succeeds in mythologizing the scene of Marat's death.

In contrast, Chénier's canonizing verse, while not subjected to the same restraints, nevertheless must not venture too deep into the bare scenery; less concerned, for instance, with the color of the knife's hilt, or the expression on Marat's face, his poem speaks more starkly to the ethereal, spiritual condition of its subject. Consider for a moment another, similar pair of complementary works: David's *La Mort du jeune Barra* (1794) and Constance de Salm's *Sur la mort du jeune tambour Barra*. Regarding the former, which Étienne-Jean Delécluze, one of the painter's early biographers described as "sans contredit, un des plus délicats qu'il ait faits, et le plus gracieux", shows the fourteen-year-old republican drummer boy as he lies dying (or perhaps he is already dead; both the title and tableau are vague on this point), completely naked and alone on a battlefield in the Vendée.³⁹⁴ (Fig. 7) The austere visual of a nude child soldier, seemingly adrift, almost blended or consumed into the color of the unfinished backdrop, gives a sense of the surreal, yet the work is returned to its historical setting by the tricolor cocarde, which the boy holds close to his chest, as a reminder of his patriotic sacrifice.

³⁹³ For a discussion on the relation between visual art and prose in relation to historical discourse, see: Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the representation of history in nineteenth-century Britain and France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Specifically pp. 1-7.

³⁹⁴ Étienne-Jean Delécluze, *Louis David: Son école et son temps (1855)*, (Paris: Macula, 1983), p. 160.

In de Salm's poem we are brought ever closer to some ideal of the young *tambour* Joseph Bara; the painting has shown us where his life ended and how he became a symbol of republican heroism. Bara's innocence is clear and visceral in the painting, while in the poem we are reminded in the most tragic of terms what it means to be innocent,

Quel furieux, altéré de trépas,
Leva sur toi son arme meurtrière?
Cet assassin ne te voyait-il pas,
Couvert encor des baisers de ta mère? (5-8)³⁹⁵

De Salm's *Jeune Barra* reads almost as a work written in contemplation of David's painting, the two so seamlessly harmonize; the poem and painting complement each other, giving us a more complete picture of the veracity of Bara's legend. David's realist tableau, the bleakness of his ochre and umber is enriched by de Salm's appeal to sentiment and to the virtues of martyrdom:

N'a-t-il pas dit: Je meurs pour ma patrie?
C'en est assez pour le cœur d'un Français,
Et son trépas a compensé sa vie. (14-16)

This is how the very seeds of national myth are planted; we shall now discuss how they blossom out of Charlotte Corday's memory.

For all their many differences, and there are indeed a great many, David's *Marat assassiné* and Chénier's 'À Charlotte Corday' are near-perfect complements, pieces of a puzzle of representation which, when taken together, provide contrasting, idealized

³⁹⁵ Constance de Salm, 'Sur la mort du jeune tambour Barra, âgé de quinze ans', *Œuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1842) II (2 vols.), pp. 273-4.

perspectives of the event and its principal actors.³⁹⁶ Where the assassin is only alluded to on David's canvas, in Chénier's ode it is Corday's victim who is invoked with the most impersonal of metaphors. Where David transforms Marat from a leprous, jaundiced corpse, into a marmoreal republican world-spirit, Chénier endows Charlotte Corday with the poetics of a mythical hero. David's painting was requested—if not commissioned—by the Convention, of which he was an influential member, where it was destined to hang once completed. Chénier's poem was likely written while he was a *proscrit*; a year after Corday was executed, Chénier would meet the same fate. Profoundly different works, composed in different mediums by men who ended up on opposing sides of revolutionary politics; yet they are brought together by the same act of violence, by the recognition of this event's place in history and a desire to memorialize it as they would.

David began working on *Marat assassiné*—certainly, in spirit, if not in earnest—on the day following Marat's death, after a deputation of the citizenry, led by a certain *citoyen* Guirault, requested that he immortalize *l'Ami du peuple* as he had Le Peletier. So enamored were they by his *Mort de Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau* that it seemed almost inconceivable to have considered commissioning anyone other than David, pageant-master of the Republic that he was, to create a work in honor of this most recent martyr of the Revolution.³⁹⁷ (Fig. 8) *Marat assassiné* was completed on 14 October 1793 and presented to the Convention, along with the painting of Le Peletier, one month later. To say the work's reception, upon its completion, was positive is a gross understatement; immediate and numerous requests were made for prints and copies, which would be distributed and hung in government

³⁹⁶ As Thomas Crow notes, the link between David and Chénier is not incidental, and can probably be traced back to the 1780s, when the former first encountered the latter's work as a brilliant young classicist. More than admiration from afar, the two formed a friendship, and this is reflected especially in Chénier's *Le Jeu de Paume* (1791), one of only two poems published during his lifetime (the other being *l'Hymne aux Suisses de Châteaueux*), dedicated "à Louis David, peintre." See: Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 92-5.

³⁹⁷ Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Louise Asmal (trans.), *Art History and Class Struggle*, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 113. See also: David Lloyd Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1948).

offices, replacing what few relics of the *Ancien Régime*—such as crosses and portraits of former kings—yet remained in year two of the Republic. David was thus proving himself a supremely competent propagandist in addition to his vocation as a painter; in fact, the two occupations were at times indistinguishable.

The painting itself depicts the dying Marat lying in his bathtub, quill in his right hand, Corday's note in his left, as he takes his last breath. (Fig. 9) David succeeds in transforming the reality, that Marat was sick (and likely disfigured) into something pristine, frozen almost, yet he nevertheless retains a profound sense of historical *moment*. Life, in the barest sense of the word, is fleeting on the tableau, yet one cannot be certain that it is being supplanted by death. It is simultaneously the end of life and the beginning of immortality. Upon viewing the painting at one of its first public exhibitions in decades, in 1846 at the *Bazar bonne-nouvelle*, Charles Baudelaire remarked,

Tous ces détails sont historiques et réels, comme un roman de Balzac; le drame est là, vivant dans toute sa lamentable horreur, et par un tour de force étrange qui fait de cette peinture le chef-d'œuvre de David et une des grandes curiosités de l'art moderne, elle n'a rien de trivial ni d'ignoble... et quand on songe à la beauté du dessin, il y a là de quoi confondre l'esprit. Ceci est le pain des forts et le triomphe du spiritualisme; cruel comme la nature, ce tableau a tout le parfum de l'idéal. Quelle était donc cette laideur que la sainte Mort a si vite effacé du bout de son aile? Marat peut désormais défier l'Apollon, la Mort vient de le baiser de ses lèvres amoureuses, et il repose dans le calme de sa métamorphose.³⁹⁸

Baudelaire astutely discerns the painting's problematization of the past, in this instance the very recent past; *Tous ces détails sont réels...ce tableau a tout le parfum de l'idéal*; it is a faithful,

³⁹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Musée Classique du Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle' *La Passion des images: Œuvres choisies*, (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2021), p. 200. Originally published in *Le Corsaire-Satan*, 21 January, 1846.

real depiction of history, yet also an idealized, one might say memorialized representation of Marat's death. Idealized in part, importantly, by virtue of Charlotte Corday's absence.

The murder weapon is of course visible, although David has changed its color from black to white. We are given no explanation for this alteration, but one can imagine that it was likely an aesthetic decision, as a black hilt would have been far less conspicuous. (Fig. 10) Similar to the placement of Pâris' sword—which hangs over the body of Le Peletier—Corday's knife is one of the only references made to her in the painting, the other being the letter. But it is more than simply one of the notes Corday sent to Marat, it is a signature of authorship; the only overt indication of Corday's agency in the painting, which places her name at the center of the tableau, directly above David's own. (Fig. 11) The note's text reads as follows:

du 13 juillet, 1793
Marie-anne Charlotte Corday au citoyen Marat.
il suffit que je sois
bien malheureuse
pour avoir Droit
à votre bienveillance. (Fig. 12)

Those small details, which maintain Corday's presence, contribute to the painting's sense of history; the knife, the letter, counterbalance the work's embellishments, its melodramatic flourishes, with historical presence. How, then, might we justify or rationalize Corday's erasure from the scene for which she was its chief antagonist? As mentioned, political considerations were paramount. Charlotte Corday represented a dangerous precedent; she could come to symbolize, or indeed embolden the forces of counter-revolution, if she did not already do so. As one scholar has argued, it was necessary for David to avoid at all costs allowing Marat's immortal virtue, as *l'Ami du peuple*, to be sullied by Corday's self-styled

classical virtue; David's "representation of Marat had to be unequivocally positive and virtuous and his evocation of Corday unequivocally negative and treacherous."³⁹⁹

However important the politics of the moment may have been in influencing David's artistic decisions, questions surrounding Corday's sex were at least of equal significance. In a painting utterly saturated with the representation of virtue, what place was there for an unmarried, childless woman? Such an untamed creature as she, who could have brought herself to murder this Republican patriarch, was surely devoid of any feminine graces; her presence would only profane Marat's memory. In the same speech to the Convention where he implored David to immortalize Marat on canvas, *citoyen* Guirault referred to *une main parricide*, a phrase which sought unambiguously to deprive Corday of any humanity, by accusing her not simply of political assassination, but by likening her crime to that of a daughter who murdered her father. It is not difficult, therefore, to juxtapose Corday not only with Marat, but with that virtuous mob of women who eagerly threw themselves at the feet of his corpse, who agonized over the loss of a man who was viewed, at least by some, as a sort of *pater familias* of the republic. Present at the Convention throughout, conscious of the popular reaction to Marat's death, and its political implications, there can be little doubt that David took all of this to account while laboring away on his masterpiece.

David's painting is among the most recognizable pieces of extant revolutionary imagery, certainly the most memorable representation of Marat's death which exists, in any medium. The Marxist critic Nicos Hadjinicolaou, in his *Art History and Class Struggle* has described it as an exemplar of the "visual ideology of the Revolutionary French bourgeoisie."⁴⁰⁰ This characterization is not without its merits; recall Baudelaire's commentary, where the painting comes to represent a distinctly modern, archetypal work, much like the ascendant French political class to whom it purports to speak. Considerations

³⁹⁹ Helen Weston, 'The Corday-Marat Affair', Helen Weston, William Vaughan (eds.) *David's Death of Marat*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 133.

⁴⁰⁰ Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Louise Asmal (trans.), *Art History and Class Struggle*, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 115.

of class add yet another dimension to Corday's absence; the daughter of minor nobility, for example, uses *citoyen* in her note while ignoring the Committee of Public Safety's national order of *tutoiement*, referring to Marat in the formal *votre*; a confounding mixture of revolutionary and reactionary vernacular, certainly a detail which David included deliberately.⁴⁰¹ Marat perishes as *l'ami du peuple*, memorialized as he is, while at work on his writing. His assassin, meanwhile, lives on in the painting as an enemy of this same *peuple*, although here only as a footnote.

André Chénier's 'À Charlotte Corday' fills in much of the figurative, as well as the literal blank space left by David on his canvas, where one imagines Corday might have stood after inflicting on Marat that fatal wound. Chénier's work, unlike David's painting, does not erase one party to the assassination, but frames it more overtly as a conflict between virtue and depravity, grace and obscenity: between liberty and terror. From the poem's first lines, Marat is clearly framed as a villain, this despite the ongoing project of his pantheonization:

Quoi! Tandis que partout, ou sincères ou feintes,
Des lâches, des pervers, les larmes et les plaintes
Consacrent leur Marat parmi les immortels;
Et que, prêtre orgueilleux de cette idole vile,
Des fanges du Parnasse un impudent reptile
Vomit un hymne infâme au pied de ses autels; (1-6)⁴⁰²

It is important to note that this, the poem's first stanza, contrives a new paradigm for the way Marat's death will henceforth be memorialized. It is also the only explicit reference to him by name; once Marat's wickedness is established, metaphorical references are far more

⁴⁰¹ For an overview of the history of the usage of *tu* and *vous*, especially during the Revolution, see: Catherine A. Maley, "Historically Speaking, Tu or Vous?", *The French Review*, 45 (1972), pp. 999-1006.

⁴⁰² André Chénier, 'Ode à Marie-Anne-Charlotte Corday', in Gérard Walter (ed.), *Œuvres Complètes d'André Chénier*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), pp. 178-80.

effective at contrasting his true nature with that of his assassin. Indeed, Corday's name is never once mentioned in the poem (besides in the title), but of course her presence is no less ubiquitous in the work because of this. Corday's heroic deeds are for Chénier inseparable from her physical appearance, which stands in contrast to Marat's hideousness, as we see in the poem's third stanza, lines 16-18 in particular:

Non, non je ne veux point t'honorer en silence,
Toi qui crus par ta mort ressusciter la France,
Et dévouas tes jours à punir des forfaits.
Le glaive arma ton bras, fille grande et sublime,
Pour faire honte aux Dieux, pour réparer leur crime,
Quand d'un homme à ce monstre ils donnèrent les traits. (13-18)

It is Corday, not Marat, who is now understood as the martyr, who offers up her own life to rescue a nation on the brink. As the next stanza emphasizes, Chénier inverts the Republic's—which is to say, David's—memorialization of the assassination. Marat's ugliness must be fully revealed to extol Corday's virtue: Jean-Paul Marat, 'Le noir serpent' (19) thus falls under Corday's 'main ferme et sûre.' (20) But it does not end with Marat; reminding us of Corday's intention to strike fear into the hearts of all tyrants, Chénier invokes her confession of motive to the interrogators:

Ton regard lui disait: "Va, tyran furieux,
Va, cours frayer la route aux tyrans tes complices.
Te baigner dans le sang fut tes seules délices;
Baigne-toi dans le tien, et reconnais des Dieux". (27-30)

Tyrannicide—and the implication that Marat and his ilk are in fact tyrants—is of course a justifiable grounds for which to commit a murder, or so Chénier believes. And unlike some of the nineteenth-century writers we shall discuss subsequently in this chapter (notably, Charles Nodier), Chénier finds no great moral dilemma in exalting Corday despite her subversion of the law. It appears as though the possibility of her guilt never crosses his mind; he views her as both necessary—if not inevitable—in an historical sense, and morally just; if anything, more Charlotte Cordays are necessary to enfeeble and ultimately defeat this perversion of 1789. Indeed, Chénier had, for some time before Marat's assassination, denounced those responsible for hijacking the Revolution. In a 1792 article in *le Journal de Paris*, titled 'De la cause des désordres qui troublent la France et arrêtent l'établissement de la liberté', Chénier describes this cabal as a band of scoundrels who have usurped the Revolution's true, patriotic cause, corrupting the whole of France from their state within the state:

Cette société en produit une infinité d'autres; villes, bourgs, villages en sont pleins. Presque toutes sont soumises aux ordres de la société mère: elle est un corps dans Paris, elle est la tête d'un corps plus vaste qui s'étend sur la France. C'est ainsi que l'Église de Rome *plantait la foi* et gouvernait le monde par des congrégations de moines. La seule admission dans ce corps lave tous les crimes, efface le sang et les meurtres.⁴⁰³

Charlotte Corday dared, however, to resist the tyrants: in Chénier's view she is worthy of the highest praise, and of the immortality enjoyed by those classical heroes from which she drew inspiration. For a poet like André Chénier, so enthralled by antiquity, yet immersed in the Revolution, Corday is republicanism in its idealized form.

⁴⁰³ André Chénier, 'De la cause des désordres qui troublent la France et arrêtent l'établissement de la liberté', in Gérard Walter (ed.), *Œuvres Complètes d'André Chénier*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), pp. p. 273.

Besides its distinction as one of the few Revolutionary works of art to extol Corday's heroism, "À Charlotte Corday" also reflects its author's place among history's uniquely transitional, idiosyncratic artists. Chénier has long been considered a heterodox amalgam of ancient and modern (although by some as *either* ancient or modern); according to Catriona Seth, we might think of him as either "dernier des classiques ou premier des romantiques, homme de son siècle ou écrivain hors du temps, relais entre Ronsard et la modernité voire entre la Grèce et le Romantisme puis le Parnasse."⁴⁰⁴ Seth's description of Chénier as an artist on the precipice, inspired by the past yet imbued with the politics of a burgeoning modernity, is exemplified in the poet's treatment of Charlotte Corday. She is transformed into a paragon, a reincarnation even, of a particularly ancient sort of virtue:

La Grèce, ô fille illustre, admirant ton courage,
Épuiserait Paros, pour placer ton image
Auprès d'Harmodius, auprès de son ami;
Et des chœurs sur ta tombe, en une sainte ivresse,
Chanteraient Némésis, la tardive Déesse,
Qui frappe le méchant sur son trône endormi. (31-36)

Corday likely would have appreciated the comparison to Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the pseudo-mythical Greek lovers who famously assassinated the tyrant Hipparchus in the 6th century BC. Immersed in the works of Plutarch—which purportedly compelled her to action—this stanza speaks almost from Corday's own psyche; it is how she hoped to be remembered. She is reimagined as Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance and, importantly, adversary of hubris. Yet this stanza also betrays the author's difficulty in reconciling Corday's gender with such a "masculine" act of violence; virtue is, after all, distinctly

⁴⁰⁴ Catriona Seth, *André Chénier: Le Miracle du siècle, mémoire de la critique*, (Paris: PUPS, 2005), p. 7.

masculine, down to its etymological roots. Chénier likens her to the Greek tyrannicides (both male), and while such a reference speaks more to his classicism (and perhaps to the relative lack of female political assassins) than to any deliberately misogynistic sentiments, it is clear in the final stanzas that the poet views Corday's actions as somewhat incompatible with the dispositions innate to her sex, yet essential in a nation whose men were not simply impotent, but neutered:

Seule tu fus un homme, et vengeas les humains.
Et nous, eunuques vils, troupeau lâche et sans âme,
Nous savons répéter quelques plaintes de femme,
Mais le fer pèserait à nos débiles mains. (63-66)

Is it therefore necessary to think of Corday as an aberration of her sex? In some sense, one must concede that Chénier does present her as virtuous yet deviant, though it must be stressed that he views such an “unwomanly” act as the consequence of a profound want of masculine virtue. Naturally, when the men of France come to be represented by those *juges sinistres*, by the Jean-Paul Marats, a figure like Charlotte Corday becomes an historical inevitability. And this is precisely how Chénier frames Corday in a poem which is, at its core, as much historical narrative as it is emotive verse.

Whatever Chénier's ambivalence towards the assassination may be, he is unambiguously inspired by Corday's death. It is not sufficient that her memory end with the thrust of her blade; in fact, it is only in dying as she did, bravely facing the guillotine and the rabid mob of spectators, that Corday becomes worthy of such a lofty verse:

Belle, jeune, brillante, aux bourreaux amenée,
Tu semblais t'avancer sur le char d'hyménée,
Ton front resta paisible, et ton regard serein.

Calme sur l'échafaud, tu méprisas la rage
D'un peuple abject, servile, et fécond en outrage,
Et qui se croit alors et libre et souverain. (55-60)

Corday comes to be defined by her place in the history of the French Revolution, as Marat's assassin, or by her place in the memory of the Revolution, primarily as the brave martyr who fearlessly accepted the consequences of her actions. In 1793 it was difficult, unpopular perhaps, dangerous certainly, to acknowledge her position in the former, as we have seen in David's painting. With respect to the latter, meanwhile, Chénier's poem was a rare exception; Corday had little place, otherwise, in the Revolution's memory.

"À Charlotte Corday" would not be published until decades later, in 1819; it was around this time that assessments of Corday's memory, along with her standing in history, began to garner more serious attention. The extent to which Chénier's poem influenced this initial renaissance of interest cannot be stated with any certainty, although his lament, "la France à la hache abandonne ta tête" seems not to have fallen entirely on deaf ears. It is clear, furthermore, that many of the texts about Corday which we shall subsequently discuss reflect a familiarity—or at least an agreement—with the spirit of Chénier's work.

Deluge of the Memoir

The ascent of *l'Ami du peuple* to the status of mythical hero was rapid, yet his decline was equally so; Marat would never again enjoy—with perhaps the one notable exception of the Bolsheviks—the esteem in which he was held in late 1793. For some time, this was true of Corday as well; throughout the Directory, Consulate, and Empire, as well as during much of the Restoration, Corday was largely forgotten, or more precisely, erased. One explanation, which we find in Vatel's study of Corday (1864-72), views this absence as a measure in line with the broader aversion to all things related to the Revolution: "De 1804 à

1829, c'est-à-dire pendant vingt-cinq ans, il n'a été composé, à notre connaissance, aucune pièce sur Charlotte Corday. Cette lacune est facile à comprendre. L'Empire était absolument hostile à la Révolution."⁴⁰⁵ Vatel, along with Guillaume Mazeau more recently, highlights a particular concern for political radicalism, one shared by Napoleon and the Restoration government, which all but ensured a de facto censure, indeed a rejection from the highest reaches of influence, of what Mazeau describes as the Marat-Corday binary. In other words, neither party was to be exalted or villainized; as Mazeau explains, "Sous l'Empire, la domestication du passé s'exprime d'abord par le silence sur l'assassin de Marat: en plein essor du pouvoir personnel de Napoléon I^{er}, il n'est pas question d'ériger le tyranicide en modèle. Ni Marat, ni Charlotte Corday: c'est la Révolution et l'ensemble de ses acteurs qu'il faut oublier."⁴⁰⁶ Until the reappearance of Chénier's works in 1819, Charlotte Corday's memory was preserved almost entirely by the aforementioned engravings, as well as in the personal writings of those who lived through the Revolution. As a broader genre, the *mémoire historique*—or *souvenir* in shorter or fragmented form—presents the Revolution from the perspective of those for whom it was, in some manner, a lived experience. Of equal importance, such texts function as both personal and historical narratives, as is the case of the glazier Jacques-Louis Ménétra, whose famous memoirs, later published under the title *Journal de ma vie*, became a sort of chronicle or crude history of the Revolution, or at least the history of *his* Revolution. Not all such works were, however, written primarily for personal reasons. Take, for instance, the accounts of Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray, or of Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne. Both were politically active, accomplished novelists of the period, for whom the diary becomes an overt, deliberate literary creation, which is to say, the authors venture beyond the scope of personal experience, thus reimagining—though not necessarily “fictionalizing”, rather

⁴⁰⁵ Charles Vatel, *Charlotte Corday et les Girondins*, (Paris: Henri Plon, 1864-1872) I (3 vols.), pp. 238-9.

⁴⁰⁶ Mazeau, *Le bain de l'histoire*, p. 263.

“personalizing”—the Revolution in works of art.⁴⁰⁷ The Corday affair, while taking up no more than a few pages in either work, presents the ordeal from the assassin’s perspective (but not in her voice); a rather novel narrative approach, certainly in 1794. *Marianne-Charlotte-Cordai*, as Rétif calls her in his *Nuits de Paris*, must be known first by her sexual abstinence: “une fille vertueuse de la vertu des Femmes, c’est-à-dire chaste.”⁴⁰⁸ Rétif seems to find some irony in the fact that Marat was killed by a virgin, that Corday’s disarming innocence was perhaps her greatest weapon: “Son air, ses discours, tout tranquillisa.”⁴⁰⁹ Yet he still laments, similarly in this regard to Chénier, those women who aspire to be men “Ô femmes! Qui voulez être hommes, et vous Homelettes, qui les y encouragez, le crime de Marianne-Charlotte est le vôtre autant que le sien...”⁴¹⁰ Mazeau views this scene as un “viol inverse”, an example of counter-revolutionary propaganda where Corday the *Amazone*, in a reversal of typical gender roles, brutalizes the emasculated Marat.⁴¹¹ And while Rétif’s treatment of Corday espouses a bafflement and misogyny which we have come to expect from many of his contemporaries, he also arms her with a weaponized femininity; she is transformed into a sort of Siren who entrances her victim, only to strike the fatal blow once he is truly defenseless. Again, Corday’s representation in text is evidently instructed by those extant visual images of her which circulated during this period. Rétif’s amalgam of archetypes—the innocent, nubile virgin with an eater of men—unites those images we find in 1793-4 with the author’s literary imagination, and anticipates the Romantic Corday, which would emerge later in the nineteenth century, notably so after 1830.

⁴⁰⁷ There is however a distinction to be made between the *mémoire historique*—for instance, the two versions of Sanson’s memoirs—and the memoir, *proprement dit*. The latter is typically that which it purports to be, namely the authentic memoirs, personal writings of its author; the former, notably during the period of interest here, was “a genre synonymous with lucrative frauds... *book-seller speculations*” according to Tom Stammers. See: Tom Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c. 1790-1890*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 72-3.

⁴⁰⁸ Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne, *Les Nuits de Paris*, 8 vols, (1788-94) (Paris: Slatkine, 1987), 8, pp. 538-9.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 539.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 540.

⁴¹¹ Mazeau, *Le bain de l’histoire*, p. 233.

Certainly, distance from the Revolution, whether in years or decades, allowed for the formation and crystallization of memory, of mythologies, and certainly of histories. In contrast to the revolutionary diary accounts, like Rétif's, we often find in later examples that sentiments ostensibly like his have become less entrenched in considerations of immediate ideology. Rather, an exercise in the memoir-history genre of subsequent decades must be conceived at least somewhat in the abstract. Where Rétif speaks first as someone bound invariably to the socio-political concerns of the moment—however much his account does attest to a certain degree of historically aware thought—the passage of time allows, even demands, that experiences be represented in text less as a reflection of (or contribution to) often transient, politically-motivated propaganda. Rétif understands Corday much like he understands the broader Revolution: as the immediate, the imminent, and therefore, the personally relevant. His writing may be historical, but it is not history, *proprement dit*; it may well be the author's memory, but neither is it a memorialization. These early, primary texts, while fascinating as first-hand accounts of the Revolution, do not yet enjoy the benefits of time's passage—that most essential ingredient in the development of memory—during which events and people may be disseminated, interpreted, reimagined, and born anew. To elaborate on this point, we might take as one example the multigenerational iterations of the apocryphal *Mémoires* of Corday's executioner, Charles-Henri Sanson, where both Corday and her executioner undergo this process.

Sanson's memoirs appear first in 1830, in two volumes, under the title *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution Française*, then in the early 1860s as the expanded, seven volume *Sept générations d'exécuteurs, 1688-1847*. While both lay claim to authenticity, neither is in fact the work of Sanson; the 1830 version was edited (and possibly written) by Balzac, in consultation with Sanson's son, Henri; Sanson's grandson (Henri's son) was largely responsible for compiling, narrating, and perhaps even writing *Sept générations*.⁴¹² Indeed,

⁴¹² Considering the apocryphal nature of these memoirs, the Sanson to which I refer should be understood primarily as a literary character in the context of the memoirs. For the sake of simplicity and coherence, I

the two are only vaguely similar; Balzac's *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, for instance, appears in 1830 as a preface, where it is passed off as a real account taken from the journal of a witness, the abbé Marolles. In the later edition, meanwhile, the same story has been fully integrated into Sanson's memoirs, given its own title, *La Messe expiatoire*, and shrouded retroactively in mystery by claiming that it was a closely guarded family secret, passed along to Balzac by Henri Sanson. Likewise, Charlotte Corday also features in both, though her appearance in the 1830 text is brief, almost as though this iteration of the executioner does not yet understand her significance, a point to which the narrator makes subtle, fortuitous allusion: "Sur les neuf heures, il fut confirmé que Marat n'était plus, et que Charlotte Corday, la femme qui l'avait assassiné (on connaissait alors son nom), venait d'être conduite à la Conciergerie."⁴¹³ Sanson, rather, describes the scene in Paris following Marat's death, the glee of those celebrating Corday's actions in contrast to the profound grief of Marat's supporters; the *bourreau*, meanwhile, is caught in the middle:

Je vis la satisfaction en présence du deuil; d'un côté le silence, ou des chuchotements; de l'autre des lamentations et des menaces. Au centre de ce contraste, j'étais la neutralité armée; cependant, sans échapper à ma position anti-sociale, je ne pouvais m'empêcher de plaindre les malheureux qui supposaient que l'heure de la délivrance avait sonné.⁴¹⁴

The memoirs of 1830 leave Corday's character markedly threadbare, never daring to venture too far into her psyche or motives, nor of Sanson's encounter with her; it might even be said that this Sanson is more sympathetic to Marat and his supporters.

make no explicit textual distinction. It may be helpful, however, to think of Sanson in this context (unless otherwise noted) as "pseudo-Sanson".

⁴¹³ *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution Française, par Sanson, exécuteur des arrêts criminels, pendant la Révolution*, (Paris: Chez les Marchands de Nouveautés, 1831), II (2 vols.), p. 371.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In the later iteration, this same event is described in radically different terms, in much greater detail, and as the fulfillment, or realization, of a mythos which, by this point in the 1860s, had undergone more than three decades of accretion. Charlotte Corday has become such a significant figure by this point that her death, which the latter text recounts in remarkable detail, occupies an entire chapter. More striking than the expanded discussion of Corday, the account itself is redrawn as a pivotal moment in Sanson's life; the 1860s narrator remarks in a brief digression that Corday's execution was the first for which Sanson left a substantial documentary account, in the form of what was to become a daily personal journal:

J'ai dit, dans le volume précédent, que Charles-Henry Sanson avait, pendant une certaine période de la crise révolutionnaire, tenu un journal quotidien non-seulement des exécutions auxquelles il présidait, mais de ses impressions personnelles. Ce journal ne devint régulier que vers la fin de brumaire, 1793; mais il nous a laissé sur la mort de Charlotte Corday une note plus circonstanciée, plus étendue que ne le sont celles qui ont servi de base aux récits du dénouement des procès de la première phase de la Révolution.⁴¹⁵

More than an account of Corday's crime and execution, this journal entry is a striking character sketch, one which is given added credibility by virtue of its alleged author. Was any figure so well positioned to offer an assessment of Corday's purported courage in these final hours of her life than her executioner? He was of course present throughout Corday's trial, as well as in the interim between her conviction and execution. His account thus carries with it a certain claim to authority, that we are reading, for the first time, the true details of Corday's death. The text goes further though, reimagining her importance to the

⁴¹⁵ Henri Sanson, *Sept générations d'exécuteurs, 1688-1847: mémoires des Sanson*, (Paris: Dupray de la Mahérie, 1863), IV (6 vols.), p. 141-2.

memory of the Revolution, crafting her into the paragon of virtue and courage for which she hoped to be remembered.

The most interesting portions of the chapter are those which discuss the period from when Corday was read her formal condemnation until her execution; in other words, those moments for which the historical Sanson (and in some cases Sanson alone) would have been present. He describes, for instance, Corday's meeting with the painter Hauer; since it is this image which will come to define an important aspect of her memory, for decades to come, the narrator's exposition of the portrait's genesis is indispensable. More concerned with finishing the last of her correspondences, attending to these final brushstrokes on her legacy, Corday never appears afraid or rueful. Sanson, evidently in awe of her composure, remarks that "Depuis M. de la Barre, je n'avais pas rencontré tant de courage pour mourir... elle paraissait moins émue que nous tous et ses lèvres mêmes n'avaient pas perdu leur couleur."⁴¹⁶ Indeed, even after arriving at the scaffold Sanson, who in an act of chivalry (or of paternal instinct) attempts to obstruct her view of the guillotine, Corday remains jovial and curious, exclaiming "J'ai bien le droit d'être curieuse, je n'en avais jamais vu!"⁴¹⁷

Sept générations strikes a discernably fantastical tone, which is to say, the work emphasizes—even embellishes—Corday's virtues, recasting her as the scene's lone hero, who no longer needs to contend with Marat for glory; in a decidedly Barthian sense of the term, Corday, almost decoupled from her historical self, becomes a sort of "mythological" figure. Among works which appeared prior to *Sept générations*, few express such unequivocal reverence for Corday. Remarkable for the comprehensiveness with which Sanson presents the Corday mythos, it is surely an apogee of her nineteenth-century memorialization. Visually stunning, spiritually infallible—and this according to her executioner no less—Corday is finally regarded like she hoped to have been. Consider, for instance, the following passage, where Sanson provides a sort of summary of Corday's life:

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 144.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 147.

Ce n'était pourtant pas à cause de sa beauté, si grande qu'elle fût; mais il me semblait impossible qu'elle restât jusqu'à la fin aussi douce, aussi courageuse que je la voyais; je voulais m'assurer qu'elle aurait sa faiblesse comme les autres; mais je ne sais pas pourquoi, chaque fois que je tournais mes yeux sur elle, je tremblais qu'elle n'eût defailli.⁴¹⁸

This passage, along with much of the chapter, reads almost as something which could have conceivably been gleaned from the very pages of Corday's own private writings, although to hear such an assessment from the *boureau* gives this image of Corday a certain mystique. Who better to sing such praises than the impartial hangman? Impartial, perhaps atop the scaffold, but in the privacy of his journal he is every bit as enamored as were Chénier and Adam Lux; another apostle in the cult of Corday.

It is certainly worth asking how the two versions of the memoir, which at least lay claim to the same conceptual project, can produce such radically distinct images of Charlotte Corday, how her image could have undergone such an enormous shift in the decades that separate them. Despite having been written by two different individuals (neither of whom, so far as we know, was Charles-Henri Sanson), they share fundamental thematic elements which justify this comparison; importantly, *Sept générations* in 1860 comments somewhat frequently, almost in an attempt at dialogue, on its earlier counterpart. As such, we should not dismiss the likelihood that these changes to Corday are not incidental, but deliberate. The next question one ought to ask is why this transformation occurs; in the thirty years which separate these two iterations of the character Sanson's account of Charlotte Corday's death, a broader reassessment of her life and memory was undertaken in various writings. Where Corday was formerly little more than a footnote in one spurious memoir—and

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 146-7.

before that largely forgotten—she becomes a dazzling symbol of virtue, amidst the terror of 1793, in another (albeit equally spurious) one. We shall hence explore the writings which were essential to Corday’s metamorphosis, beginning with an article—or rather, a *souvenir*—written in 1833 by Charles Nodier.⁴¹⁹

Nodier’s *souvenir* of Charlotte Corday exhibits many of the same thematic trappings as the works of Chénier, Rétif, and others from that prior generation. Born in 1780, Nodier was only a teenager when Marat was assassinated, yet he seems to recall the event—and Charlotte Corday, importantly—with what appears to be a shocking degree of clarity. This undoubtedly speaks more to his creative abilities as a writer than it attests to any remarkable faculties of memory, as the author begins with the concession that this is not a *souvenir*, but that the account is premised on a story with which everyone is familiar: “Je n’avais jamais vu Charlotte Corday, je ne sais d’elle que ce qu’en rapporte l’histoire; et ce qu’on rapporte l’histoire, tout le monde le sait comme moi.”⁴²⁰ This statement reveals the true intent of his *souvenir* of Corday; that whatever her place in the historical Revolution may be, Nodier is more interested in what is left unsaid by those historical accounts. The historical Corday appears in the text for only a fleeting moment; “Elle apparoît seule, absolument seule, au milieu des faits de son temps, et n’y passe qu’un jour pour tuer et pour mourir.”⁴²¹ Is he in search of a mythological Corday? The young woman of historical record seems to Nodier altogether mundane, at least when considered only in the context of the event to which she is bound. She is perfectly suited, however, to inspire the poetic mind, to become even more than she was on that infamous day.

After recounting Marat’s assassination in a few brief sentences, Nodier explains his ambivalence as follows: “L’histoire n’ajoutera rien à cela, et ce que l’imagination auroit l’étrange audace d’y ajouter seroit certainement de trop.”⁴²² History, for Nodier, soon

⁴¹⁹ The *souvenir* of Charlotte Corday was first published in the October, 1833 edition of *La Revue de Paris*.

⁴²⁰ Charles Nodier *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l’Empire*, 2 vols, (Paris: Charpentier, 1860), 1, p. 92.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

reaches a limit in its ability to explain the Revolution in any satisfactory manner; this is probably why he writes *souvenirs de la révolution*—ostensibly “personal” memories, though mostly constructed around the author’s retrospective musings—rather than more impersonal *récits historiques* or some such subgenre of the literary-historical. In a later preface Nodier refers to these writings as *histoires fantastiques*; in what amounts to an apologia for the *souvenirs*, the author defends—and indeed, defines—his work according to the avowed objectivity of his memory. As the imperiously romantic Nodier explains,

C’est que mon impartialité sans effort est tout bonnement le résultat de l’expérience, et que je suis nécessairement impartial, parce que j’ai vu, parce que j’ai senti, parce que j’ai vécu, parce que j’ai trouvé de tous les côtés, à travers une foule de préventions, de préjugés, d’extravagances, d’excès et même de fureurs, de bonnes intentions, des talents supérieurs, des vertus sublimes; parce que l’habitude et l’obligation de comparer m’ont convaincu que la société ne gagne presque rien à rien; parce que l’éclectisme du philosophe, scepticisme accommodant qui choisit dans tout pour conserver le droit de tout contester, est, suivant moi, la seule raison de l’histoire.⁴²³

As an attempt to annihilate the bounds that distinguish history from memory, Nodier’s *souvenirs* implore the reader to suspend notions of where the one begins and the other ends; memory can indeed communicate the very same truth one finds in the corporeal language of history. We recall Pierre Nora’s agonistic history-memory paradigm, where memory *s’enracine dans le concret, dans l’espace, le geste, l’image et l’objet*; for Nodier, memory is tantamount to *le concret*.

⁴²³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

This conceptual framework is exemplified in the *souvenir* of Corday, which from its beginning effortlessly mixes his memory of the moment he first encounters the name Charlotte Corday with the necessary ‘historical’ conditions in France (Besançon, more precisely) in the summer of 1793. But after having established the necessary context, history, as a detached, impersonal endeavor, becomes dispensable. It is more important to relay the essence of the event, of its actors, in the spirit which Nodier invokes in his preface. That Marat was, for instance, a physician, then a journalist, this is immaterial; Nodier seeks to glimpse at Marat’s spirit, and what he observes by doing so is, like Balzac’s description in *Les deux rêves*, the very negation of humanity. He approvingly quotes here Pierre-Joseph Briot, a local journalist and revolutionary, whose words most aptly describe Nodier’s feelings towards *l’ami du peuple*: “C’est un monstre qui n’a rien de commun avec la nature humaine, et j’en rends grâces au ciel, car il faudroit rougir d’être homme, si Marat étoit un homme.”⁴²⁴ Nodier’s own sentiments are not far off from those of Briot: “Marat est la seule créature qui m’ait fait comprendre la haine.”⁴²⁵

Nodier is explicit and unambiguous in his expressed contempt for Marat, but is it then necessary that his view of Corday be unequivocally favorable? This is rather more complicated. Where Marat can be understood as an exceptionally wicked historical villain, it is insufficient that his assassin be little more than his undoing. Corday cannot be remembered simply as the young woman who took an evil man’s life, but as the very antithesis of that man; she must represent the very same virtues which David bequeaths to Marat in his painting, those which inspired the fictional Laurence in 1800, and which compel Balzac in 1841. The religious undertones of Nodier’s text, those that are, up to this point, inferred by subtle references to some cosmic struggle by proxy—between good and evil—quickly rise to the fore, with Corday assuming the role of a divinely ordained idol,

⁴²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 95.

prompting the young Nodier to fall to his knees and exclaim: “SAINTE CHARLOTTE CORDAY, PRIEZ POUR NOUS!”

Although the text clearly delineates the battle lines drawn between good and evil, nowhere do politics seem to overtly instruct such verdicts. Nodier was of course sympathetic to the royalist cause; his opposition to the Revolution, its tyrants and their deeds, permeates much of his writing.⁴²⁶ Yet in his *souvenir* of Charlotte Corday, he seems uninterested in rooting any judgement in those sorts of partisan considerations. On the contrary, Nodier’s is a work devoted first to moral and spiritual considerations; political and historical questions of course have their place—one senses in the *souvenirs* a sort of nostalgia for this past, made even more distant by the overthrow of the *Ancien Régime*’s last vestige, in 1830—but he is far more interested in exploring Corday’s character, in contrasting the principles for which she killed with those by which Marat lived. If indeed Corday possessed the spirit of an idealized antiquity (or indeed, of an idealized *Ancien Régime*)—the classical virtue she learned from Plutarch and inherited from her ancestor Pierre Corneille—why should we not grace her with the same praise that we do Brutus? Furthermore, what prevents us from treating Corday as we do any of our Christian saints? Nothing; the prayer uttered by the young Nodier foreshadows the religious pilgrimage which he takes as an adult, to the room in which Corday stayed, where she planned Marat’s death. His experience is nothing short of sublime, a revelation which pervades all his senses:

Charlotte Corday avoit respiré l’air que je respirois; elle avoit écrit sur cette table; elle s’étoit reposée sur cette chaise; elle veilla sur ce grabat pendant trois nuits solennelles à invoquer sa Némésis. Tout ce qui m’entouroit étoit plein de son souvenir, et pour ainsi dire de sa présence. J’étois heureux, si heureux qu’il me

⁴²⁶ Nodier’s view of the Revolution is expressed somewhat ambiguously in his early novel *Thérèse Aubert*, and later in his *Dernier banquet des Girondins*, both of which we have discussed in previous chapters.

paroit difficile à comprendre aujourd'hui qu'un cœur mortel ait pu contenir une joie semblable à la mienne.⁴²⁷

The moments spent in this room are for the author but a respite from the graver historical realities which, however much he might wish to avoid them, eventually warrant earnest reflection. Nodier is most concerned with the precedent which may be set when one celebrates an extrajudicial killing, or its perpetrator: “Une nation où le meurtre est regardé comme droit, comme légalité, comme héroïsme, n’a rien qui l’élève au-dessus des cannibales.”⁴²⁸ But it is not the living Corday, the morally complicated historical assassin, who Nodier immortalizes in his text. Rather, he observes in Corday that same sort of potential for immortal glory which David exploits in his painting of Marat. This *souvenir*, though, is less about Corday herself than it is the impression which she leaves on the author and his various acquaintances. An intimate study of memory, we learn more about Nodier and his contemporaries than we do about Corday; she is *un lieu de mémoire*, an ethereal icon of the Revolution whose profane story is, for Charles Nodier in 1833, of less interest than is her discarnate legacy.

Nodier’s *souvenir* demonstrates to us the process by which an event becomes memory, how that memory in turn begins its ascent toward mythological status, and finally how that mythology acts upon the author, for whom it is part of a broader mythos. And while we cannot say with any certainty whether Nodier did in fact drop to his knees as a child in prayer to Saint Corday, or if his pilgrimage and the religious experience in her apartment years later was a fictional account, such pedantic inquiries would only draw away from the spirit of the text. In other words, should we read the work as an earnest *souvenir* or as a fictional *conte*, we are still left with the same impression, namely that Charlotte Corday

⁴²⁷ Nodier, *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l’Empire*, 1, p. 106.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 109.

symbolizes for the author a rare exemplar of virtue to survive the Revolution and, therefore, one worthy of historical myth.

Charlotte Corday as Literary Monument

The pilgrimage, like Nodier's, is a recurring motif in Romantic literature, often serving as a means of conveying nostalgia—contrasting an idealized past with the desolate present. It is used, as we have already discussed, across a fairly broad thematic spectrum, from Chateaubriand's journey east toward the Holy Land (or his journey west to America) to Pierre-Simon Ballanche's imagined exploration of the memory of the regicides in his *L'Homme sans nom*. Perhaps most famously, in the fourth canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the prison cell of the Italian poet Torquato Tasso becomes a shrine, a monument, for disillusioned artists of the age. Alphonse Esquiros' *Charlotte Corday* (1840) picks up on this theme of enshrinement, although it is not a poet but an historical figure who is exalted. We first encounter the narrator-as-wanderer in the work's introduction, on a pilgrimage through Caen—Corday's city—in search of even the slightest trace of her in the living memory. Much like Nodier's experience in Corday's room, all of Normandy evokes for this unnamed traveler a sense of closeness to her:

Caen était avant tout, pour moi, la ville de Charlotte Corday. Humble pèlerin, je venais retrouver quelques traces de sa vie dans les lieux habités par cette femme historique... Je cherchais son souffle dans l'air, sa voix dans le bruit du vent ou des feuilles, la marque de ses pieds sur le sable; mais je ne tardai pas à reconnaître que ses pas étaient effacés du sable, et sa mémoire du cœur des hommes.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁹ Alphonse Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2 vols., (Paris: Desessart, 1840), 1, p. 6.

Beyond the deeply personal element of this journey, to which the above passage alludes, the pilgrimage also exploits the problematic relationship between history and memory. What happens to both when the subject of remembrance fades into obscurity? History is preserved, even fortified by the passage of time, suspended as if in amber. Memory, however, quickly deteriorates under the same forces; forgetting is of course memory's antithesis and its very negation. In contrast to the deliberate, active erasure of Corday from the historical record immediately following her death, the *longue durée* process of *oubli* is a passive phenomenon. It is the "inaction" of forgetting which, in this case with respect to Corday, takes her memory (i.e. that which would otherwise have been memorialized) as its victim. Thus, even if he conflates the two terms on occasion, Esquiros' lament in the introduction is one for the lost memory of Corday. It appears to our traveler that she has suffered a fate worse than that to which even her fiercest enemies could have subjected her:

Cette indifférence me navra. Soyez donc femme; ayez pour vous la jeunesse, la beauté, l'amour; sacrifiez tout cela à une action courageuse pour que, trente ans plus tard, un étranger vienne parler de vous, sur le sol même que vous avez foulé, sans réveiller aucun souvenir dans le cœur de vos concitoyens! Les hommes de la terreur étaient plus justes envers cette femme: ils voulaient faire abattre sa maison, y semer du sel, et planter sur la place vide un poteau, avec cette inscription: "Ici fut la maison de Charlotte Corday!"⁴³⁰

It is at this point, then, that we can understand the pilgrimage theme as a means of justifying the novel to follow. It is the novelist's duty here to infuse Corday's memory with those very same traits—*la jeunesse, la beauté*—which compelled David to leave her image off his tableau. Unlike Nodier's cathartic, deeply personal *souvenir*, Esquiros uses a similar

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

framework only as a vehicle for introducing the work's principal ambition, which is to restore Corday's place in the Revolution's living memory: "Puisse le monument que vous élève ici l'auteur, bien fragile, bien pauvre et bien éphémère sans doute, de papier et non de bronze, ranimer quelque mémoire autour de votre nom, ô Charlotte!"⁴³¹

Visual representation is for Esquiros a vital ingredient in the crystallization of memory, it is the most resilient means of memorializing something, as he concedes above; a bronze statue would have perhaps been more enduring, but one must settle for the medium with which one is most adept. But the absence of some hypothetical bronze simulacrum adorning the center of Caen does not, as we well know, mean that Corday's physical image was relegated to forgery and imagination. Indeed, as the narrator recognizes, a single portrait of Corday, which has survived the years—though even here incidentally, because it was forgotten, left to gather dust—serves as a foundational relic, vital to Esquiros' reconstruction in this text:

Le seul souvenir, en effet, que Charlotte Corday ait laissé dans la ville de Caen, est un souvenir de beauté et de sagesse... Il n'existe qu'un seul portrait authentique de Charlotte Corday; tous les artistes qui, pendant la révolution, et dans ces derniers temps, ont attaqué cette tête historique, l'ont fait d'idée; le peintre David, dans son tableau de la mort de Marat, n'ayant pas le modèle sous les yeux, n'a pu rendre que de souvenir la figure de cette femme exécutée peu de jours après avoir tué l'Ami du Peuple. Depuis, on a inventé une tête grecque, une Liberté dans le goût girondin, qu'on a nommée à tout hasard Charlotte Corday. Il est vrai que pendant le procès on tira un croquis de sa figure, qui courut ensuite les rues, mais l'on sait le peu de fidélité de ces sortes d'images. Nous resterions donc privés de ce document historique, sans un hasard heureux et singulier.⁴³²

⁴³¹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁴³² *Ibid*, p. 17-20.

It is indeed true that such images of Corday were supremely important for whatever fragments of her story survived through the first half of the nineteenth century, although this is the first we hear of the painting to which Esquiros refers.⁴³³ The author seems to be saying that this particular image of Corday is sublime because it is true; yet it is the very nature of this truth which grants the image a profoundly mythological sense, reaffirming her existence and rationalizing her allure.

As a sort of inversion of David's principal reasons for excluding Corday from his *Marat assassiné*, Esquiros contrasts the authentic, physically beautiful Corday of the portrait with the truly grotesque, moribund Marat, whose appearance was nothing like the graceful representation which we find in David's masterpiece. In fact, it is his death mask, and its corresponding sketch (also by David) which most accurately portray the Marat of those last days of his life: "Il reste de Marat un portrait peint et un masque de plâtre; le portrait est de David; le plâtre a été moulé sur la figure du mort... Il se mourait depuis longtemps, et Charlotte Corday n'a guère assassiné qu'un cadavre."⁴³⁴ (Fig. 13) This contrast runs much deeper than concerns of visual representation; Corday's modest, pastoral beauty in the painting becomes a lens by which to observe this paragon of northern sensibilities.⁴³⁵ She symbolizes a virtuous, distinctly provincial way of life; reared on "ses auteurs de prédilection"—Plutarch, Rousseau and Corneille—these readings thrust Corday on the path to heroism, while her Normand manners, "un peu masculines pour le temps" pave the way for a new type of French woman: "un garçon déguisé en demoiselle" according to her friends, or a precursor to "les femmes fortes du dix-neuvième siècle, madame de Staël et madame Sand", according to Esquiros.⁴³⁶ All this refers to the point at which an "historical"

⁴³³ A. Decauville Lachènée, *Catalogue des Tableaux, Gravures, Objets d'Art Exposés dans la Salle de la Collection Mancel*, (Caen: Charles Valin, 1897), p. 13-14.

⁴³⁴ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2 vols., (Paris: Desessart, 1840), 1, p. 43.

⁴³⁵ Mazeau, *Le bain de l'histoire*, p. 295.

⁴³⁶ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 1, p. 24-5.

conception of Charlotte Corday meets her memorialized image, preserved by those who knew her and adapted by those who did not. But there is also a mythical figure preserved in her memory; Helen, Judith, Jeanne d'Arc; each historical epoch, according to Esquiros, had such a woman: "au plus fort de la révolution, se montre Charlotte Corday."⁴³⁷

Esquiros aspires above all to use Corday as a means of linking the "unmemorialized" past with a present which has largely abandoned the foundations upon which it was built. The past, according to this paradigm, is in a constant state of dialogue where each period, across decades, centuries even, instructing those which follow. The Revolution is not exempt from this, although it is a uniquely important juncture, to which the history of France leads, and from which the present has sprouted. This past must be tended to, and cultivated in minds and hearts; this is how memory persists, lest it vanish:

En vérité nous croyons plutôt à cette tradition vivante qu'à l'histoire écrite: celle-là en effet n'a ni orgueil ni intérêt à tromper; elle dit ce qu'elle a vu et rien de plus; si la mémoire lui manque quelquefois, le sentiment qu'elle attache aux hommes et aux événements ne lui manque jamais, et c'est ce dernier qu'il importe surtout de recueillir.⁴³⁸

The search for some authentic memory of Corday—that is, whatever those few surviving witnesses have preserved in their minds—incidentally leads our traveler to the home of Marat's sister, who has spent the last half century quietly guarding her brother's legacy. Betraying an uncanny, "surnaturelle" likeness to her famous sibling, mademoiselle Marat has devoted her very existence since 1793 to her brother, down to her physical appearance: "Le caractère de Marat a été refait sur son crâne, sur sa figure, sur l'ensemble

⁴³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 26.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

de son système physiologique.”⁴³⁹ So devoted is she to this cause—one might even say she is proud of her brother—madame Marat has refused to marry, in order to preserve the family name. A living monument dedicated to Jean-Paul Marat, her opinion of Charlotte Corday, whom she describes as “une aventurière” and “une fille de mauvaise vie” is understandably curt and disinterested.⁴⁴⁰

The meeting with Marat’s sister should serve as a reminder that Corday and Marat are, in some sense, symbiotic organisms; if we understand the one in a certain way, the other is correspondingly transformed. If we unfairly denigrate Corday, claiming for instance—as Marat’s sister does—that she was simply a maniac, this cheapens Marat’s legacy; no longer a martyr, he becomes little more than the victim of a deranged killer. Esquiros is sensitive to this point, explaining, “quelque chose aurait manqué à la révolution si la Providence n’avait pas inventé Marat.”⁴⁴¹ Anthony Zielonka goes so far as to claim that Esquiros was more sympathetic to Marat (Esquiros does absolve Marat of fanaticism in a later chapter, calling him a prophet),⁴⁴² although this did not interfere with his admiration for Corday.⁴⁴³ The text certainly bears this out; without the existence of her victim, Esquiros argues, we would never have the heroic Charlotte Corday. Esquiros’ work is therefore not simply an attempt to reinvigorate the memory of Corday, but that of her famous victim, to whom he expresses unambiguous reverence, claiming “la Providence ne laisse jamais vivre dans les grandes époques d’hommes inutiles.”⁴⁴⁴

Each of the narrator’s encounters in this introduction serves as the foundation for the novel’s subsequent chapters. The meeting with Marat’s sister, for instance, prepares us for a more compassionate depiction of the principled and benevolent physician—Marat before he

⁴³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 42-3.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 41.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 46.

⁴⁴² Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2, p. 200.

⁴⁴³ Anthony Zielonka, *Alphonse Esquiros (1812-1876): A Study of His Works*, (Paris: Champion, 1985), p. 98-9.

⁴⁴⁴ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 1, p. 49.

became *l'Ami du peuple*. These memories are templates, for the author's reconstructions to come. As another example, we might consider the narrator's meeting with the elderly man in Caen. His vivid recollection of Corday's voice is striking; he describes her "timbre angélique" which even decades later he still remembers with perfect clarity: "cette voix m'est restée dans la tête."⁴⁴⁵ The old man's memory returns, repurposed by the novelist, in the aptly titled chapter "une voix de Sirène." The chapter is not, however, an adaptation of David's tableau, but one which attempts to reveal the grim reality of Marat's condition; Esquiros remains more faithful to the image of the death mask, of Marat as a living corpse, already partially entombed: "Depuis quelques jours, Marat... ne pouvait se tenir hors de l'eau sans être dévoré par des souffrances aiguës; ce petit homme volcanique et agité s'essayait à prendre dans la baignoire l'attitude et le repos du cercueil où il allait bientôt dormir."⁴⁴⁶ Marat, "en proie aux horreurs d'une mort prochaine qui s'avavançait lentement et à pas certains sur son corps en dissolution,"⁴⁴⁷ appears rejuvenated, temporarily healed upon hearing Corday off in the distance. When her voice appears in the text—as angelic, seductive even—it has an undoubtedly hypnotizing effect (as the title suggests), but it is also merciful, Aesculapian. Her voice immediately alleviates Marat of his many ailments, yet it also condemns him to death:

Cependant une douce émotion était venue au cœur de Marat avec cette voix si fraîche. Il lui sembla ne pas l'entendre pour la première fois; cette voix adolescente le reporta en arrière vers les années printanières et meilleures de sa jeunesse. Touché d'un timbre si pur qui semblait la musique naturelle d'une belle âme, il appela sa servante Thérèse: "Laissez entrer", lui dit-il.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁴⁶ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2, p. 132.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 132-3.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 137-8.

Corday then descends upon her victim with a sublime grace; indeed, this exposition anticipates the work of Alphonse de Lamartine (who read and quoted Esquiros' novel in his *Histoire des Girondins*), whose famous epithet for Corday, *l'ange de l'assassinat* expresses with more brevity those characteristics to which Esquiros alludes throughout the course of the work. But this penultimate iteration of Corday is unmistakably *angelic*: "Jamais l'innocence ne prit des traits si purs, un maintien si convenable, un air de candeur si austère pour paraître devant ses juges. On eût dit un ange descendu du ciel."⁴⁴⁹ The description is rife with contradiction, as we have come to expect in discussions of Corday, although it is no longer her sex alone which is so perplexing. Frozen in a perpetual youth and augmented by visual representations which idealize her beauty, the quintessence of this Romantic Corday, who aspires to kill—and die—for noble, republican ideals, is still entrenched in, or validated by, her youthful energy and feminine beauty:

Oh! Mieux vaut pour elle avoir été coupée comme la fleur dans toute sa jeunesse et sa beauté, mieux vaut pour une héroïne, comme Jeanne d'Arc ou Charlotte, laisser dans le souvenir des hommes une idée de fraîcheur et de grâce qu'un débris misérable rongé par la rouille des ans; mieux vaut l'échafaud que la hideuse vieillesse, et Charlotte Corday a bien fait de mourir.⁴⁵⁰

It is preferable for the artist that Corday died as she did; where it was necessary for David to contort Marat into something beautiful, Corday, as Esquiros professes, arrives ready-made, preserved in a sublime state because she died in her youth. The archetype after which Stendhal modeled Clélia Conti, and indeed Balzac his Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, becomes ever more comprehensible when viewed through the lens of Esquiros' work. All three young, idealistic women, ultimately fail to realize their greater aspirations; Clélia does not

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁵⁰ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 1, p. 30.

kill the prince, while Laurence's plot to assassinate Napoleon is thwarted, its conspirators arrested. And although Corday does manage to kill Marat, her act proves not only ineffective in service of its idealistic ends, but wholly counterproductive:

Elle crut avoir rétabli la paix en France. Elle s'imagina que son audace allait arrêter court la marche sanglante des événements, comme si une révolution qui tenait depuis trois ans contre les armées étrangères et la guerre civile, pouvait alors reculer devant un coup de couteau.⁴⁵¹

Clélia and Laurence are not executed for their plotting, though it is not difficult to view them as heroic. It is impossible, however, to see them as martyrs. Corday is immortalized in death, according to Esquiros, because her actions are both successful according to their intent (unlike Laurence's) and world-historical (unlike Clélia's), in terms of her goal of repelling the march of revolutionary tyranny. It is at this point in the novel, her trial and subsequent execution, where Esquiros fashions her into a figure of national mythology, merging her physical beauty with a virtue of spirit:

Charlotte Corday était sublime dans sa simplicité: ses yeux bleus jetaient un grand éclat, tempéré par de longs cils presque toujours abaissés modestement; son port magnifique, ses belles épaules, les plans larges et développés de sa poitrine saillante, donnaient à son attitude calme une certaine fierté romaine qui était d'un effet fort imposant... Charlotte Corday était dans ce moment-là une femme adorable et surhumaine: on lui eût baisé les pieds.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2, p. 182-3.

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, p. 215-16.

Corday's death in 1793 becomes the moment of her apotheosis in 1840; she of course hoped to become a national symbol of virtue, a wish that Esquiros fulfills, as he contrasts her austere image atop the scaffold with that of the raucous mob who thirst for her blood. Despite the crowd's hostility, their rabid hatred for Marat's assassin, "cette femme ne tremble pas. Son visage est toujours le même. Une noble et sage insouciance la soutint en face de la mort. À l'exemple de ces fières Romaines qui finissaient l'existence comme un rêve, elle ne mourra pas: elle aura vécu."⁴⁵³

The novel concludes—on what at first appears to be a tragic note—from the perspective of Adam Lux, who is reimagined here as Corday's despairing lover, whose militant devotion to her is realized only too late, once she has ascended the scaffold. This tragic tone soon yields to one of hope, of triumph; consumed by thoughts of immortality, Lux comes to represent a sort of prophet, declaring Corday, who has conquered her own mortality, a savior of this wayward civilization. We are already conscious of the fate that soon awaits the young revolutionary, yet Esquiros repurposes his story, transforming Lux into an apostle of this fledgling cult. Corday, meanwhile, becomes a Christlike figure, the guillotine her cross. This same fate of course awaits Lux, who provokes the indignation of those false gods of the Terror. After writing an incriminating letter to the Convention, where he proposes the erection of a statue in Corday's honor, with *Plus grande que Brutus!* inscribed on its pedestal, he is swiftly persecuted as an apostate, imprisoned, and condemned to die. This is an end which he zealously embraces: "Il montra sur la guillotine le même courage, la même douceur, le même mépris du supplice que son modèle. Seulement quelque chose de plus exalté brillait dans ses yeux. Il porta sa tête à la mort avec enthousiasme."⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, the guillotine no longer represents for Corday's acolytes a symbol of the regime's terrifying force, but the triumph of virtue over those very forces. For Adam Lux, the Girondins, and all subsequent victims of the Terror, execution becomes a holy rite,

⁴⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 254.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 282-3.

the guillotine a sacred icon: “comme la croix qui avait cessé d’être, pour les premiers chrétiens, un gibet ignominieux depuis que le juste y avait été attaché, la guillotine, aux yeux des Girondins, n’était plus un supplice, mais un autel, depuis que cette femme divine y était montée.”⁴⁵⁵

The conclusion makes clear that *Charlotte Corday* is far more than a literary monument to its eponymous heroine, that Esquiros rehabilitates Corday to substantiate a broader philosophy. According to Paul Bénichou, Esquiros believed that providence assigned a sort of sacred purpose to women, Mary Magdalene for one example, “des femmes-parias dont le rachat inaugurerait celui de tout le genre humain.”⁴⁵⁶ This female archetype would prepare the nation—or humanity—for its rebirth and regeneration. The “special mission of woman”, as Zielonka terms it, understands Corday as a tool of providence, who fulfills her purpose: she kills Marat, is executed, and thus inspires others who will face a similar fate to die not as victims, but as martyrs.⁴⁵⁷ To reconceive Corday as a tool of divine providence, Esquiros—who championed the Revolution in this, as well as his other works—appropriates a reactionary view of history for revolutionary ends. His depiction of Charlotte Corday is not markedly different in this sense from Joseph de Maistre’s view of Robespierre, nor of Ballanche’s regicide. Whether punitive or regenerative, in each case these historical actors are entangled with the authors’ various conceptions of the inscrutable machinations of *l’Être suprême*.

Esquiros’ novel is a commendable attempt at incorporating Charlotte Corday into the tapestry of national myth, to imbue her with the characteristics of a mythical figure, while never straying too far from the historical record. The work is poetic where necessary, though ever conscious of the historical substance with which it purports to deal. Esquiros simultaneously creates a memorialized version of Corday—something which few (if any)

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 292.

⁴⁵⁶ Bénichou, ‘Romantismes français’, *Le Temps des Prophètes*, 1, p. 872.

⁴⁵⁷ Zielonka, *Alphonse Esquiros*, p. 98-9.

had earnestly attempted, at least since Chénier decades prior—while asserting that his proposed representation stands as a monument to French society writ large:

Cependant le souvenir de Charlotte Corday s'élèvera mélancoliquement dans notre siècle révolutionnaire à mesure que des brises plus douces en chasseront les nuages; elle est à nos yeux par ses grâces sérieuses, par son dévouement et par l'élévation de son âme. Comme la messagère de l'avenir, lequel appartient, selon nous, à la liberté et à l'amour, aux femmes et à Dieu. Voilà pourquoi nous avons choisi cette belle et chaste figure de vierge pour dominer tout notre livre.⁴⁵⁸

As her first “biographer” (we use the word somewhat loosely here), Esquiros broke new ground in the study of Charlotte Corday: he was “one of the first writers to study [her] psychology and motives.”⁴⁵⁹ And while she was still a relatively misunderstood, although alluring figure even in 1840, Esquiros ventures into the murkier depths of Corday’s psyche, decoding one of the Revolution’s great enigmas; Corday emerges from the work as a figure of almost mythical stature. The novel is, furthermore, particularly important in a decade which saw unprecedented advancements in the broader historiography of the Revolution. Corday is an important representative of these advancements, serving as an archetype for selfless revolutionary virtue. Yet Esquiros, like most of his exclusively male predecessors, could see Corday only through sexist tropes deeply entrenched in the period’s cultural norms. Whether admired (or detested) for her beauty or virginal purity, as a necessarily female instrument of providence, or a woman in outright rebellion against her feminine nature, assessments of Corday were always bound up with her gender. This would begin to change, however, in 1842 with Louise Colet’s *Charlotte Corday*.

⁴⁵⁸ Esquiros, *Charlotte Corday*, 2, p. 326.

⁴⁵⁹ Zielonka, *Alphonse Esquiros*, p. 99.

A drama in six acts (or tableaux), Colet sets out to correct the errors in Corday's historical memory, to present her first as a woman with legitimate and reasoned political views. As she proclaims in the work's preface, the role of women in the Revolution has been grossly misrepresented by generations of thinkers since 1789:

Les femmes, dont on a dans l'histoire trop admis ou trop nié l'influence, sont parfois l'expression lumineuse d'un parti. La Gironde eut pour poésie Charlotte Corday et Mme Roland; la Montagne eut pour symbole les sinistres tricoteuses et les furies de la guillotine!⁴⁶⁰

Colet's project was rehabilitative in its intent and unambiguously prejudiced in its conception of Corday as absolutely good and of Marat as irredeemably evil:⁴⁶¹ "Ce Marat si hideux/Est-il vraiment un monstre aux instincts sanguinaires?... Madame, les récits de son iniquité/N'égaleront jamais l'horrible vérité."⁴⁶² Inspiration for the play came, as with many of the works we have discussed in this chapter, after the author viewed an image of Corday, in this case a painting of her mounting the steps of the guillotine. Francine du Plessix Gray characterizes the encounter as resulting in a sort of divine possession, explaining that after glimpsing Corday's image, "Louise's legend factory immediately went to work; she would later report that she had written the sixty-page play in one sitting, overwhelmed by the vision of her heroine rising to the scaffold."⁴⁶³ What sets Colet's work apart from prior representations of Corday is that she does not merely attempt to construct a monument, but strikes a balance between the mythologized assassin and the historical figure; the play is

⁴⁶⁰ Louise Colet, *Charlotte Corday*, in *Chants des vaincus: poésies nouvelles*, (Paris: A. René et Compagnie, 1846) p. 233.

⁴⁶¹ Mazeau, *Le bain de l'histoire*, p. 289.

⁴⁶² Colet, *Charlotte Corday*, p. 250.

⁴⁶³ Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Rage and Fire: A Life of Louis Colet: Pioneer Feminist, Literary Star, Flaubert's Muse*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 91.

hagiography and historical drama in near-equal measures. Those focal points of Corday's legend are still present in her beauty and general appearance, but Colet strikes a notably different tone, by using these aspects not to fetishize her subject, but to illuminate her as a symbol of distinctly female, republican virtue.

Along with her other revolutionary drama, *Madame Roland*, Colet attempted to forge a radically new *lieu de mémoire*, one which countered the offensive trope of hysterical “furies de la guillotine”, as Mazeau explains, “habituellement utilisé pour ridiculiser l’engagement politique féminin.”⁴⁶⁴ And while Corday's memory had not typically been subject to such overt debasement—at least not since the Revolution—her objectification in subsequent decades was still a blight on her historical memory. By rectifying this misrepresentation, Colet sought to show that Corday was a pinnacle not of those outmoded female virtues, but of an unsexed revolutionary spirit, which women could exemplify no less admirably than their male compatriots. Corday does not rebuke or lament her sex, of course, but exalts and in some sense lays claim, as a woman, to “Ces mâles sentiments, ces vertus héroïques... L’amour de la patrie et de la liberté.”⁴⁶⁵ Still somewhat controversial in the 1840s, the suggestion that women might possess agency as rational political actors—along with the work's moderate-left disposition—ensured that it would never see the stage.⁴⁶⁶

Like Esquiros two years before her, Louise Colet viewed Corday as a mythical symbol of the Revolution, one which exemplified the period's most admirable values. But more than that, Corday was but one (famous) instance of the broad revolutionary spirit, a mythological hero in what would one day be understood as France's “age of gods”; as she explains in the preface, “La Révolution et l’Empire sont nos âges homériques; là se trouve désormais notre poésie vraiment nationale... La représentation de ces grandes scènes, dans lesquelles le peuple fut acteur, sera pour le peuple un jour un enivrant spectacle.”⁴⁶⁷ By

⁴⁶⁴ Mazeau, *Le bain de l’histoire*, p. 289.

⁴⁶⁵ Colet, *Charlotte Corday*, p. 263.

⁴⁶⁶ Du Plessix Gray, *Rage and Fire*, p. 91.

⁴⁶⁷ Colet, *Charlotte Corday*, p. 232.

properly and faithfully recreating Corday's image as a legendary republican hero, Colet hoped to integrate women into the revolutionary *citoyenneté*, and thus to truly universalize the collective memory of the Revolution, irrespective of sex, by establishing a national myth around the figure of Charlotte Corday. Indeed, what Colet hoped to achieve on the stage is similar in its objectives to the project of two of the century's eminent historians of the Revolution, Alphonse de Lamartine and Jules Michelet. We shall conclude this chapter by looking at their momentous contributions to the Corday mythos.

Conclusion

L'ange de l'assassinat, la religion du poignard; these two phrases, written within years (perhaps months) of each other represent two parallel crescendi in Charlotte Corday's apotheosis. Both present their subject, problematic, complicated figure that she is, with these assemblages of disparate, contradictory words that coalesce, somehow, only in the context granted to them by the person to which they refer. The former, Lamartine's summation of Corday's dual identities; a delightfully confounding union of antonymous concepts which, as the author explains, "réunît les deux extrêmes de l'admiration et de l'horreur dans la langue des hommes."⁴⁶⁸ Admiration and horror, not antithetical but surely difficult to harmonize; what is more, each of the texts we have discussed, every reference to Corday, expresses an admixture of these two sentiments; thus, Lamartine in some sense demystifies—or perhaps "remystifies", in his own way—five decades of Corday representations. In its own time, *Histoire des Girondins* was considered by many of Lamartine's Romantic contemporaries to be a revelation, an illuminating breath of fresh air into the catatonic memory of the Revolution. Victor Hugo, for instance, remarked that the work "vient, pour la première fois, d'enseigner la révolution à la France." Lamartine

⁴⁶⁸ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2014) II (2 vols.), p. 1458.

undoubtedly deserves praise for writing such an elegant narrative of the Revolution, but is this an exceptional case of old wine in new bottles? Does he, as Hugo perhaps somewhat hyperbolically suggests, provide some new insight into the Revolution? This seems the wrong question to ask here. Rather, we should ask how the work elevates its subject. To this question we respond that if Lamartine's *Histoire* succeeds, it does so primarily because its distinctly poetic touch transforms, in an almost Homeric sense, the historical into the heroic.

But what is it that makes Lamartine's style, his poetics of history, so unique and noteworthy? How does such a distinct style enrich the author's approach to history writing? Consider as one particularly illuminating (and stunning) example the following, the scene where Corday embarks upon her journey to the scaffold:

Le ciel s'était éclairci. La pluie, qui collait ses vêtements sur ses membres, dessinait sous la laine humide les gracieux contours de son corps, comme ceux d'une femme sortant du bain. Ses mains, liées derrière le dos, la forçaient à relever la tête; cette contrainte des muscles donnait plus de fixité à son attitude et faisait ressortir les courbes de sa nature. Le soleil couchant éclairait son front de rayons semblables à une auréole. Les couleurs de ses joues, relevées par les reflets de sa chemise rouge, donnaient à son visage une splendeur dont les yeux étaient éblouis. On ne savait si c'était l'apothéose ou le supplice de la beauté que suivait ce tumultueux cortège.⁴⁶⁹

Passages such as this one highlight two important components of Lamartine's style: description and tempo. As she awaits execution all sense is heightened, no sentiment or emotion is left to ambiguity; we experience this scene from Corday's perspective; we feel the forces of nature, the rain, which gives way to sunshine at the most opportune of

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1455.

moments; an intervention surely, by that arbiter of providence. This brief interlude, where time seems to grind to a halt, is a momentary respite from that dizzying pace with which events have unfolded up to this point. It is easy enough to criticize the inconsistent pace of narration—and many have, from Flaubert up to the present—which is at times jarring; Corday is tried and convicted in what seems like an instant, yet her final moments persist for diegetic eons. The effect of this unmistakable shift in rhythm does, however, have a dramatic impact on Corday's story; this scene assumes the characteristics of a painting, Lamartine's response to David's *Marat assassiné*; his *Corday martyrisée*. The historical tableau is vivid, splendid in all its detail, in its contrasts of color and sentiment. Rain soaks the horde of enraged spectators, transforming them to a muddied stream; Corday stands in contrast dressed in red—the very same image which had captured Louise Colet's imagination some years earlier. It is an historical detail, but also an aesthetic device; the color, as the author notes, distinguished assassins from all the other condemned, but it has the dual effect of contrasting Corday's precise contours with the amorphous mob that surrounds her. This, then, is Charlotte Corday's legacy according to Lamartine.

Having painted this grand fresco, raising his subject to her sacred place in the Pantheon of national heroes, Lamartine nevertheless runs afoul of the very same ambivalence which so troubled many of his predecessors. Not one to resign the enigma to posterity, however, the author clearly understands his place in this project of mythmaking: “Comme ce peintre qui, désespérant de rendre l'expression complexe d'un sentiment mixte, jeta un voile sur la figure de son modèle et laissa un problème au spectateur, il faut jeter ce mystère à débattre éternellement dans l'abîme de la conscience humaine.”⁴⁷⁰ Thus we instead get this earnest, problematic image of Corday, *l'ange de l'assassinat*.

Criticized, or dismissed outright, by some in the subsequent generations of more “scientific” historians for the many artistic liberties which the author takes—his use of

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1457.

anecdote and of rumor, of conjecture; to say nothing of his ornate style—Lamartine must be credited as a sort of Romantic Herodotus, for what he may lack at times in critical rigor he more than compensates for in service to the creation of a compelling national myth. Following after Esquiros—and anticipating the second iteration of Sanson’s *Mémoires* a decade later—Lamartine realizes the project of Charlotte Corday’s iconization. Of course, his is a text dedicated to the memory of a relatively small cadre of historical actors—predominantly men—a point which he establishes from the first pages of the *Histoire des Girondins*: “J’entreprends d’écrire l’histoire d’un petit nombre d’hommes...” Thus, while it is surely a work written for the people, it is also one which is not necessarily of the people; Charlotte Corday—*l’ange de l’assassinat*—is a static monument, meant to stand somewhat in isolation, able to endure the brutality of time’s passage, as an Olympian icon.

Michelet’s sobriquet, *la religion du poignard*, sends Corday’s memory in another direction entirely. We should first consider this phrase in its full context, as follows: “Charlotte était un bien autre souvenir, d’une toute autre poésie que celui de Louis XVI, vulgaire martyr, qui n’eut d’intéressant que son malheur. Une religion se fonde dans le sang de Charlotte Corday: *la religion du poignard*.”⁴⁷¹ By contrasting her with the executed Bourbon monarch, Michelet emphasizes the transformation, or passage rather, from the old, decrepit religion to a new, vivacious one; Louis XVI is the passive victim, the “vulgaire martyr”, which is to say, he is mere collateral, flotsam swept away in the deluge of Revolutionary violence. Charlotte Corday is a vigorous, “modernized” emblem of violent political action. As Michelet explains,

Le vieux patron des meurtres héroïques, Brutus, pâle souvenir d’une lointain antiquité, se trouve transformé désormais dans une divinité nouvelle plus puissante et plus séduisante. Le jeune homme qui rêve un grand coup, qu’il s’appelle Alibaud

⁴⁷¹ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 2 (2 vols.), p. 511.

ou Sand, de qui rêve-t-il maintenant? Qui voit-il dans ses songes? Est-ce le fantôme de Brutus? Non, la ravissante Charlotte, telle qu'elle fut dans la splendeur sinistre du manteau rouge, dans l'auréole sanglante du soleil de juillet et dans la pourpre du soir.⁴⁷²

In one fell swoop Michelet, here the iconoclast historian, takes a cudgel to nearly all prior representations of Corday (save perhaps for that of Louise Colet). She is liberated both from historical precursors—Brutus, notably—and from the broader constraints which gender has placed on her memory. Neither unsexed nor hyperfeminized, Michelet recognizes Corday's femininity—the implications of *séduisante* are unambiguous—while offering her example, as Colet had done before him, to all, but specifically here to *le jeune homme*. Indeed, this new religion speaks to a broad national memory, not only to *les femmes enragées*, to the Laurence de Cinq-Cygnés and Clélia Contis; *la religion du poignard* is, quite literally, the profession of faith of a national myth. What this new religion entails for Michelet, we shall discuss in the following chapter.

⁴⁷² *Ibid*, p. 511.

Chapter 6. Michelet's Heroic Age

Nous avons vu, de nos jours, des actes extraordinaires, d'admirables sacrifices, des foules d'hommes qui donnaient leurs vies; et pourtant, toutes les fois que je me retire du présent, que je retourne au passé, à l'histoire de la Révolution, j'y trouve bien plus de chaleur; la température est tout autre. Quoi! Le globe aurait-il donc refroidi depuis ce temps?

-Jules Michelet, *Les Femmes de la Révolution*

Introduction

When Michelet exalts Charlotte Corday with the phrase *la religion du poignard*, he bestows upon her memory an aura of superstitious reverence. But this phrasing signifies more than the apotheosis of a single person, for when he recasts Corday as an embodiment of the national spirit—as a patron saint of post-Revolutionary France—it is an earnest appeal to the French people. Religions of course require congregants, true believers who in some manner exemplify the core tenets of the faith; those for whom such a figure as Corday might reflect a sacred, rather than merely profane (historical) symbol of a shared tradition which is rooted in historical memory. They also require monuments, temporal structures—either figurative or literal—which persist long after their architects and builders have perished. The unfortunate reality, as Michelet notes in his 1847 preface to the *Histoire de la Révolution française*, is that the Revolution has but one monument which has survived:

Le Champ de Mars, voilà le seul monument qu'a laissé la Révolution... L'Empire a sa colonne, et il a pris encore presque à lui seul l'Arc de Triomphe; la Royauté a son Louvre, ses Invalides; la féodale église de 1200 trône encore à Notre-Dame; il

n'est pas jusqu'aux Romains qui n'aient les Thermes de César. Et la Révolution a pour monument... le vide... Son monument, c'est ce sable, aussi plane que l'Arabie... Un tumulus à droite et un tumulus à gauche, comme ceux que la Gaule élevait, obscurs et douteux témoins de la mémoire des héros...⁴⁷³

In some sense Michelet's preface is a belated, although no less pertinent response to the question of memorialization raised during the Revolution, by writers like Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and revolutionaries like Saint-Just. It was, after all, the latter who argued that "la piété publique doit aux grands hommes qui ne sont plus, quelle que soit leur patrie, des monuments qui les éternisent, et entretiennent dans le monde la passion des grandes choses."⁴⁷⁴ No such monuments exist, much to the chagrin of Michelet, for whom such structures are both near to his heart, and were central to his intellectual development as an historian; as he recalls in *Le Peuple* (1846),

Ma plus forte impression d'enfance... c'est le Musée des monuments français, si malheureusement détruit. C'est là, et nulle autre part, que j'ai reçu d'abord la vive impression de l'histoire. Je remplissais ces tombeaux de mon imagination, je sentais ces morts à travers les marbres, et ce n'était pas sans quelque terreur que j'entrais sous les voûtes basses où dormaient Dagobert, Chilpéric et Frédégonde.⁴⁷⁵

But in lieu of this loss—or in the case of the Revolution, nonexistence—of these symbols, there is an alternative, the people. A living memorial within whom the Revolution stirs, and from which its legacy endures:

⁴⁷³ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 2 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 1, p. 6.

⁴⁷⁴ Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, *L'esprit de la Révolution et de la constitution de France*, in *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 465.

⁴⁷⁵ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), p. 14.

La Révolution est en nous, dans nos âmes; au dehors, elle n'a point de monument. Vivant esprit de la France, où te saisirai-je, si ce n'est en moi? ... Les pouvoirs qui se sont succédé, ennemis dans tout le reste, ont semblé d'accord sur un point, relever, réveiller les âges lointains et morts... Toi, ils auraient voulu t'enfouir... Et pourquoi? ... Toi seul, tu vis.⁴⁷⁶

Seeing as this passage is taken from the preface to a history of the French Revolution, the statements above can surely be read as self-aggrandizing, or more charitably as Michelet's defense of, or justification for this monumental recreation of what he understands to be French civilization's most consequential and triumphant moment. Personal motives aside, Michelet's preface expresses the core ethos of his *Histoire de la Révolution française* and of his broader oeuvre. Indeed, we see throughout his career the development of a philosophy of history that emphasizes the role of tradition and myth in the genesis of written history, one which situates the people at the center of this project of memorializing a national past; the sublime, mythical undertones which he attaches to Corday are but one example among many.

In the preceding chapters we examined many of the contributions made by the *nous* to whom Michelet refers above. We have traced the Revolution's journey in the written word, over the course of five decades, its representation and reimagination, and the many ways it was incorporated into French literary culture. This study concludes with Michelet for several reasons, which I believe are intuitive and, one hopes, will therefore further illuminate the path we have traversed towards this end. The core reason, unsurprisingly, is that Michelet was a mid-nineteenth-century historian of the French Revolution whose contributions to the field (and subfield) were immeasurable. His *Histoire* stands as perhaps the century's most significant study of the Revolution, certainly up to the point at which it

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 4.

was written. By the same token, it is necessary to defend his inclusion in a study which thus far has concentrated primarily on literary fictions. In brief, my justification centers around two aspects of Michelet's work: the style and structure of his prose, and the conceptual, philosophical approach which serves as the framework for his history. Regarding the former, Michelet's work has survived the relentlessly corrosive force of time in no small measure because of his elegant and captivating style. His descriptions are subjective and evocative; his narration is often nonlinear and replete with digressions. The finished product can therefore be read as a sort of "nationalized" or, to borrow Paul Viallaneix's term, a *laïcisée* version of divine scripture: a gospel of the Revolution with Michelet playing the role of historian-evangelist.⁴⁷⁷ In his study, Viallaneix cites the *Histoire*'s depiction of the storming of the Bastille as the *ne plus ultra* of Michelet's pseudo-religious treatment of the Revolution, and as a scene which ties together all the other parts—a sort of revolutionary *Passion*. Michelet's recreation of this tableau stands out for its conspicuous appeal to a national mythos, which is clear in the following, where he subtly characterizes the act of taking the Bastille as all-encompassing—a moment of both spontaneity and divine inspiration:

L'avenir et le passé faisaient tous deux même réponse; tous deux, ils dirent:
'Va!'... Et ce qui est hors du temps, hors de l'avenir et hors du passé, l'immuable droit le disait aussi. L'immortel sentiment du juste donna une assiette d'airain au cœur agité de l'homme, il lui dit: 'Va paisible, que t'importe? Quoi qu'il t'arrive, mort, vainqueur, je suis avec toi!'⁴⁷⁸

This sort of passage, as Christopher Prendergast explains, is emblematic of the work's goal of resurrecting the past, of identifying, then giving vitality to what Michelet believes is the

⁴⁷⁷ Paul Viallaneix, 'Jules Michelet, évangéliste de La Révolution française', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 66.1 (1988), p. 45.

⁴⁷⁸ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 135.

nation's heroic age "as if it were a living present, but also to project a future point of retrospect from which the original besiegers, now old ('vieillards') speak of and to the meaning of their experience."⁴⁷⁹ However, it is not only the *vieillard* for whom Michelet speaks, but also the deceased, specifically those whose sacrifices, according to Benedict Anderson, contributed to the "rupture of 1789 and the self-conscious appearance of the French nation."⁴⁸⁰ This project of national awakening is invariably tied to the act of collective remembering; as we saw in his treatment of Corday, Michelet seeks to unify the people around a shared tradition rooted in historical memory, which is itself universal in nature. Spoken only by what Prendergast calls "the imagined voice"—and what Anderson refers to as the "national imagining"—historical memory is collectivized and personified, "a rhetorical device designed to carry a particular message: of all the major historical events the old men could have known in the space of their lifetimes, only 14 July 1789 'was the day of the whole people'."⁴⁸¹ It is this mythical personification which commands the people in the passage above; *voilà* echoes from both past and present, it is the collective, timeless voice of the nation.

Michelet returns to the Bastille at various, opportune points throughout his work, referencing it as a generative event in the birth of the French revolutionary spirit. We can see how this motif operates as a ubiquitous, mythical symbol in the following, a biographical introduction to Madame Roland, her own revolutionary origin story: "Elle entend, avec toute la France, le canon de la Bastille: son sein s'émeut et se gonfle; le prodigieux événement semble réaliser tous ses rêves, tout ce qu'elle a lu des Anciens, imaginé, espéré; voilà qu'elle a une patrie."⁴⁸² Michelet breaks with the Revolution's chronological progress

⁴⁷⁹ Christopher Prendergast, *The Fourteenth of July and the Taking of the Bastille*, (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 3.

⁴⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2016), p. 198.

⁴⁸¹ Prendergast, *The Fourteenth of July*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸² Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 669.

to introduce Roland and to draw attention back to 1789, to the ideological spirit that inspired the storming of the Bastille, principles which are critical to understanding her character, and which, importantly, Roland herself would never abandon. Even for a contemporary to the Revolution like Roland, the Bastille carries a symbolic, mythical importance; it is already, at this moment in the past, memorialized and thus regarded with a degree of veneration, a point which Michelet stresses by reinvoking it as a point of reference, as the very pinnacle of revolutionary virtue. By diverging from the flow of historical narrative, he treats the Bastille scene as belonging to a heroic age, distinct from the rest of history. Most importantly, the scene represents the organic, spontaneous expression of the heroic spirit, an eternal monument to the Revolution, and a lucid reminder of how far it had subsequently drifted from those glorious early days.

The counterpoint to his exaltation of the Bastille is Michelet's harshly critical tone when discussing contrived, artificial attempts to manufacture such iconography, as we see for instance in his terse dismissal of the *fête de la raison*. In his view, the ersatz celebration of philosophy in late 1793 was the “*anti-Bastille*”, a “Chaste cérémonie, triste, sèche, ennuyeuse.”⁴⁸³ Uninspiring and politically aloof, the *fête* is dismissed as a hollow, almost blasphemous spectacle: “Est-il nécessaire de dire que ce culte n'était nullement le vrai culte de la Révolution?”⁴⁸⁴ But its gravest error, as he explains, lies in abandoning the heroic principles of 1789 in favor of an uninspired homage to rationalist intellectualism:

Ce froid essai de 1793 ne sort pas de son sein brûlant, mais des écoles raisonneuses du temps de l'Encyclopédie. — Non, cette face négative, abstraite de Dieu, quelque noble et haute qu'elle soit, n'était pas celle que demandaient les cœurs ni la nécessité du temps. Pour soutenir l'effort des héros et des martyrs, il fallait un autre Dieu que celui de la géométrie. Le puissant Dieu de la nature, le Dieu Père et

⁴⁸³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 2, p. 646.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Créateur... lui-même n'eût pas suffi; ce n'était pas assez de la révélation de Newton et de Lavoisier. Le Dieu qu'il fallait à l'âme, c'était le Dieu de Justice héroïque, par lequel la France, prêtre armé dans l'Europe, devait évoquer du tombeau les peuples ensevelis.⁴⁸⁵

The contrast between these two tableaux—the mythologized Bastille and the ironically profane *fête de la raison*—is significant because it reflects the author's view of how the Revolution should be memorialized with the revolutionary government's own failure to create a lasting, culturally resonant monument.

When viewed as an historical monument—as was surely intended—the *Histoire* in its totality reflects, across its thousands of pages, the very same spontaneous, poetic vigor as was present in a scene like the *prise de la Bastille*. And this quality is precisely what gives Michelet's work such an alluring character; as Aude Déruelle explains, his overarching view of the Revolution—with all its meandering and metamorphosis, its flux and reflux—reflects a departure from many of the conventions of more traditional historical narration. The Revolution is special, unique, and is treated according to this axiomatic truth: “Ce temps ne se réduit en aucune façon au principe de successivité, ni à un progrès continu, suivant une ligne droite, mais bien au contraire, ce temps est historicité, chaque époque étant “spécifiée” selon ses propres lois.”⁴⁸⁶ In Lionel Gossman's view, meanwhile, Michelet's treatment of the Revolution problematizes his recreation of the past by obscuring those assumed boundaries, which separate history and literature, and indeed those which exist to distinguish past from present. This he accomplishes, as Gossman explains, by recreating the Revolution “as nothing less than an irruption of a different temporality into the time of profane history. The Revolution does not belong to ordinary history; it occurs in a time out of time, the sacred

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 646 Note. 1.

⁴⁸⁶ Aude Déruelle, ‘Changer de rythme: note et digression (*Histoire de la Révolution*)’, in *Michelet, Rythme de la prose, rythme de l'histoire*, ed. by Paule Petitier (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2010), p. 50.

time of origins.”⁴⁸⁷ Michelet’s Revolution, according to this explanation is not history, certainly not in the conventional sense, for it draws upon elements of a mythological, rather than critical historical nature. And Michelet explicitly acknowledges as much, emphasizing the importance of “popular” culture—the culture of the people; those for (or perhaps to) whom he writes—as an invaluable resource for the historian, and a bedrock upon which myth is constructed. This is a point which he emphasizes in a methodological digression, from the *Histoire*’s second book:

Quant à nous, qui n'avons nullement négligé les livres, et qui, là où les livres se taisaient, avons cherché, trouvé des secours immenses dans les sources manuscrites, nous n'en avons pas moins, en toute chose de moralité historique consulté avant tout la tradition orale. Et ce mot ne veut pas dire pour nous le témoignage intéressé de tel ou tel homme d'alors, de tel acteur important. La plupart des témoins de ce genre ont trop à compter avec l'histoire, pour qu'elle puisse trouver en eux des guides bien rassurants. Non, quand je dis tradition orale, j'entends tradition nationale, celle qui reste généralement répandue dans la bouche du peuple, ce que tous disent et répètent, les paysans, les gens de ville, les vieillards, les hommes mûrs, les femmes, même les enfants, ce que vous pouvez apprendre, si vous entrez le soir à ce cabaret de village, que vous recueillerez, si, trouvant sur le chemin un passant qui se repose, vous vous mettez à causer de la pluie et du beau temps, puis de la cherté des vivres, puis du temps de l'Empereur, du temps de la Révolution... Notez bien ses jugements; parfois, sur les choses, il erre, le plus souvent il ignore. Sur les hommes, il ne se méprend point, très rarement il se trompe.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁷ Lionel Gossman ‘Michelet and the French Revolution’, in *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art*, ed. by James A. W. Heffernan (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1992), p. 85-86

⁴⁸⁸ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 585.

Michelet's principal focus was to create, in his historical writings, a monument to the Revolution that the people—vanguard of the *tradition orale* that they are—can identify with, for it comes from them, and is them. That which we have referred to in previous chapters as national myth is given its most comprehensive treatment in the *Histoire*, according to the grand vision of French Romanticism's most important historian. Yet to better understand Michelet's ambitious project, it is necessary first to examine an important aspect of his work's philosophical foundations, beginning with the discovery of a largely forgotten eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher.

Towards 1850: From Vico to 'Le Peuple'

In the 1869 preface to his immense, nineteen volume *Histoire de France*, Michelet does not neglect to acknowledge the profound intellectual debt which he owes to Giambattista Vico, stating: “je n’eus de maître que Vico. Son principe de la force vive, de *l’humanité qui se crée*, fit et mon livre et mon enseignement.”⁴⁸⁹ Decades after publishing, in 1827, a translation of the *Scienza Nuova*, along with a corresponding *Discours sur le système et la vie de Vico*, a study of Vico's idiosyncratic philosophical study of history, Michelet would return briefly to the work, to acknowledge its enduring impact on his own thought. In this brief homage, Michelet identifies one aspect of Vico's philosophy which had a particularly strong influence over his view of history, *l’humanité qui se crée*. As he had explained forty years earlier, in the *Discours*,

Le premier principe de la science nouvelle: les hommes ont fait eux-mêmes le monde social, tel qu’il est; mais ce monde n’en est pas moins sorti d’une

⁴⁸⁹ Jules Michelet, *Préface de 1869*, in *Histoire de France: La Gaule, Les Invasions, Charlemagne*, (Paris: Équateurs, 2008), p. 14. See also: Paule Petitier, *Jules Michelet: L’homme histoire*, (Paris: Grasset, 2006), pp. 58-59.

intelligence, souvent contraire, et toujours supérieure aux fins particulières que les hommes s'étaient proposées.⁴⁹⁰

This principle, which Vico calls *verum ipsum factum*, provided him with a means, as Hayden White explains, “of distinguishing between the heuristic potentiality of the sciences of physical nature on the one side and the projected sciences of human nature, of culture, and of society on the other... The criterion of knowledge is the capacity of the knower to produce that of which he has knowledge.”⁴⁹¹ To put it in simpler terms, Vico professed that those things which we create will always be more readily comprehensible to us than the natural world, which we can merely observe; “since it [the natural world] is not *factum* by us”, as Isaiah Berlin explains, “it is not *verum* for us.”⁴⁹² The implications of this view on the study of these creations—art, literature, politics and government, and of course history—cannot be understated; neither was this point lost on Michelet.

Michelet's discovery of Vico's philosophy marked a pivotal moment in the young professor's intellectual development, instilling in him an idea that would remain throughout his career, namely that historical events—and the Revolution perhaps most of all—were the result of deliberate and precise human action and not the product of the blind march of progress à la Thierry or Guizot, nor of de Maistre's doctrine of divine providence.⁴⁹³ As an aspiring historian still in the springtime of his intellectual development, Michelet put the veracity and applicability of this theory to the test in his earliest historical work, the *Histoire Romaine* (1831), a *longue durée* study of Rome from its pre-Etruscan origins to the eve of the Empire. Echoing his earlier analyses of Vico, Michelet uses the work's introduction to frame

⁴⁹⁰ Jules Michelet, *Discours sur le système et la vie de Vico*, in *Philosophie de l'histoire*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2016), p. 117.

⁴⁹¹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 198.

⁴⁹² Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 112.

⁴⁹³ Aurélien Armani, *Michelet, le philosophe historien*, in Jules Michelet, *Philosophie de l'histoire*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2016), p. 32-33.

his study of Rome first according to many of those same philosophical precepts, reiterating the principle that “l’humanité est son œuvre à elle-même.”⁴⁹⁴ Importantly, Michelet incorporates the writer’s role more explicitly into this relationship—the one which exists between a civilization and its past—explaining in no uncertain terms the process by which history is transformed into something which more closely resembles myth. And much like his discovery of the “real” Homer revealed to Vico the generative nature of mythology among ancient cultures, Michelet likewise observes the potential for new blind poets to emerge from among the citizenry, to preserve and transcribe the distilled historical memory and traditions of their people. As Vico himself notes, “The peoples of Greece so vigorously contested Homer’s native land, and nearly all of them claimed him as their own, because those Greek peoples were themselves Homer.”⁴⁹⁵ This accounts for the resonance of such myths among the people, but where do the actual creators—or rather scribes—of these works fit into the calculus? To this question Vico responds that “the rhapsodes were themselves the authors of these epics, since they were part of the peoples who recorded their history in these epics.”⁴⁹⁶ In other words, national myth is the creative product of entire civilizations; having first internalized the “historical” origins of their cultural traditions, these precedents are then bestowed, for ease of transmissibility, with a cohesive form and structure. Michelet appears to largely concur with this view, explaining in the preface to the *Histoire Romaine*,

Ces héros mythiques, ces Hercule dont le bras sépare les montagnes, ces Lycurgue et ces Romulus, législateurs rapides, qui, dans une vie d’homme accomplissent le long ouvrage des siècles, sont les créations de la pensée des peuples... Quand l’homme a voulu avoir des hommes-dieux, il a fallu qu’il entassât des générations en

⁴⁹⁴ Jules Michelet, *Histoire Romaine*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003), p. 11.

⁴⁹⁵ Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, ‘trans. by David Marsh’, (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 382.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

une personne, qu'il résumât en un héros les conceptions de tout un cycle poétique. À ce prix, il s'est fait des idoles historiques, des Romulus et des Numa. Les peuples restaient prosternés devant ces gigantesques ombres.⁴⁹⁷

As with Michelet's other early writings, the *Histoire Romaine* establishes the foundations for his unique approach to both historical contemplation and its literary representation. And while explicit references to Vico's philosophy are certainly less frequent in his later work, it should not be inferred that Michelet simply outgrew this early influence, or that he abandoned it entirely. Many of the ideas which he first encountered in the *Scienza Nuova* would remain an important part of the historical approach he employed later, although perhaps none were so central as his conception of the people—that heroic multitude by whom history is made—which he would fully elaborate in an aptly titled treatise written in 1846, uncoincidentally around the same time he began to write the *Histoire de la Révolution française*.

Having given marked consideration, in these early writings, to the role which *le peuple* plays in first creating the past through will and action, then ensuring its preservation in a culturally intelligible manner, through recitation and transcription, it is thus unsurprising that Michelet would devote an entire book to the subject of these very people. A long-form homage to his fellow citizen, *Le Peuple* is a work of the heart, an expression of sentiment, and importantly, of experience. In some sense a sort of *Avant-propos* to the *Histoire de France*—of which he had completed around half in 1846—*Le Peuple* reveals to the reader the nation's spirit as Michelet views it. An entire cultural tradition, a mélange of past and present, is on display in the quotidian experience of this citizenry, if only one is so inclined to open one's eyes and witness it.

⁴⁹⁷ Michelet, *Histoire Romaine*, p. 11.

Another of Michelet's primary designs for *Le Peuple*, again implied by the title, is to show that France is indeed *one* nation composed of a cohesive population, unified by a shared nobility of spirit which he attributes to the triumph of 1789: "On dit que la Révolution a supprimé la noblesse; mais tout le contraire, elle a fait trente-quatre millions de nobles... Un émigré opposait la gloire de ses ancêtres; un paysan, qui avait gagné des batailles, répondit: 'Je suis un ancêtre!'"⁴⁹⁸ Inspired in part by his reading of Vico, Michelet's interest and belief in a coherent, national idea of *le peuple* was also stirred, according to Michèle Hannoosh, by Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse*.⁴⁹⁹ As Hannoosh notes, "The people had occupied Michelet's thought from his early work on the Middle Ages (Joan of Arc, for instance), and one could argue that the idea of nation stands behind the entire project of the *Histoire de France*. But both concepts came to the fore in a number of contexts centered on Géricault in the mid-1840s."⁵⁰⁰ What is evident in the journal entry to which this analysis refers is that Michelet had a rather negative view of French artists—specifically those of the *Ancien Régime*—who, he believed, had failed to properly represent the people in their painting. This was the case, Michelet argues, because "the people" as such did not exist prior to the Revolution:

Il [le peuple] ne soit pas né successivement, mais en une fois, par la Révolution. Philippe de Champaigne et les autres sont bourgeois. Valentin est petit gentilhomme. Poussin et Claude Lorrain ennoblis d'Italie. Terrible avènement du peuple dans le *Radeau*. Combien noble, après la Révolution et l'Empire, faisant signe à l'avenir!⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁸ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, p. 88.

⁴⁹⁹ Michèle Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 122.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200, footnote 1.

In contrast to these older artists, who were blind, according to Michelet, to the people as such, painters like Géricault, and indeed Delacroix, expressed a far more cohesive view of the nation's identity. In the latter's *La Liberté Guidant Le Peuple*, Michelet observed, as Joseph Mali explains, an immortalized tableau of "the spontaneous uprising of the Parisian people", and consequently "what Vico had actually conveyed in his memorable descriptions of the revolutions of the Roman plebeians, to wit, that what really makes the masses act and react collectively and effectively are historical myths."⁵⁰²

Despite Michelet's view that French painters of previous generations had repeatedly failed to sufficiently represent the inherent, heroic nature of this subject, he observes in the work of Géricault—or indeed, of Delacroix—the faithful portrayal of the people, who have finally been given the dignity and recognition which they had demanded through the Revolution. The praise which he offers to these two artists is not, however, extended to the period's popular novelists; in stark contrast to *Le Radeau*, these writers, Michelet argues, offer a bleak and wholly negative, cropped image of French society; they often depict the people according to the most decadent or depraved examples among them. Referring to Sand and Sue, respectively, he explains:

Des romans classiques, immortels, révélant les tragédies domestiques des classes riches et aisées, ont établi solidement dans la pensée de l'Europe, qu'il n'y a plus de famille en France. D'autres, d'un grand talent, d'une fantasmagorie terrible, ont donné pour la vie commune de nos villes, celle d'un point où la police concentre sous sa main les repris de justice et les forçats libérés.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰² Joseph Mali, *Legacy of Vico in Modern Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 19.

⁵⁰³ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, p. 61.

While neither writer is mentioned explicitly, one can deduce their names by virtue of Michelet's characterizations of their work. Balzac, meanwhile, whose *Les Paysans* was written just before *Le Peuple*, in 1844, is the focus of its own critique: "Un peintre de genre, admirable par le génie du détail, s'amuse à peindre un horrible cabaret de campagne, une taverne de valetaille et de voleurs, et, sous cette ébauche hideuse, il écrit hardiment un mot qui est le nom de la plupart des habitants de la France."⁵⁰⁴ We might therefore conclude that *Le Peuple* is, in some sense a response to the uncharitable depictions, specifically those of the French underclass in these literary texts. And this is a reasonable conclusion when one considers the fact that Michelet includes it in his preface, and indeed revisits this very line of criticism later in the text, where he again accuses the contemporary French novel of denigrating the people, although here not along class lines, but according to broad, national ones:

J'ai sous les yeux deux romans, écrits avec un grand talent. Eh bien! Dans ces romans français, quel est l'homme ridicule? Le Français, toujours, le Français. L'Anglais est l'homme admirable, la Providence invisible, mais présente, qui sauve tout. Il arrive juste au point pour réparer toutes les sottises de l'autre. Et comment?... C'est qu'il est riche. Le Français est pauvre, et pauvre d'esprit.⁵⁰⁵

What is implicit in Michelet's criticism of the mid-nineteenth-century French novel is that it often expresses, if not an outright betrayal of the Revolution, certainly a series of grievous libels committed against its progeny. But there is also the presence of an agonistic relationship between historian and novelist, in a sort of struggle for dominion over the nation's cultural identity and self-image. As Lionel Gossman argues, a reaction like

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225. The two novels to which he refers here are George Sand's *Indiana*, and Germaine de Staël's *Corrine*.

Michelet's to the prevailing literary fictions of the time was an important aspect of the broader romantic, postrevolutionary historical mind: "After the French Revolution, the dominant ambition of historians was to make history—rather than fiction—the successor of epic as the repository of society's values and of its understanding of the world."⁵⁰⁶

According to Michelet's view, history's central objective entails—like epic before it—reconstructing the past in such a way that it both reminds and inspires on a national scale: "Pour ma part, j'espère bien que ma science, ma chère étude, l'histoire, ira se ravivant à cette vie populaire, et deviendra par ces nouveaux venus, la chose grande et salutaire que j'avais rêvée. Du peuple, sortira l'historien du peuple."⁵⁰⁷ Where the novel has failed to exalt the nation's virtues in its artistic representations of the people, history has, in some sense a patriotic obligation to fill this void which exists in the nation's literary culture. But we should take special note of how he characterizes the historian as *du peuple*; the relationship he has with the vocation (and with the past) is therefore personal, intimate, and fully integrated into his psyche and spirit. Indeed, the critical aspect of Michelet's depiction of the people and their history is that he counts himself among them, not necessarily as a first citizen but surely as a product of the same cultural—which is to say, historical—forces. His dream is not to have the last, definitive word on the nation's history, but to set a new paradigm through which other, perhaps more capable souls can refine and perfect the national story: "Puisse mon histoire imparfaite s'absorber dans un monument plus digne, où s'accordent mieux la science et l'inspiration, où parmi les vastes et pénétrantes recherches, on sente partout le souffle des grandes foules, et l'âme féconde du peuple!"⁵⁰⁸

If *Le Peuple* does indeed provide that cohesive framework for Michelet's historical thought (as I believe it does), it also offers a glimpse into how the author views himself in relation to the people and their—which is to say, his—national history. And much like

⁵⁰⁶ Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 252.

⁵⁰⁷ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, p. 139.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 140.

Michelet's other work, *Le Peuple* is deeply introspective and at times personal; the entirety of historical knowledge is, by the author's admission, bound up with—and inseparable from—his own experience: “J'ai, par-dessus mon âge, deux ou trois mille ans que l'histoire a entassés sur moi, tant d'événements, de passions, de souvenirs divers où entrent pêle-mêle ma vie et celle du monde”⁵⁰⁹ The idea of a “citizen-historian” necessarily implies, to some extent, the blurring of lines which would otherwise demarcate the respective cognitive domains of the writer and the objectivity of his work; but this knife does cut both ways. As a result of his view that the historian should be first among equals, the citizen of unique insight and talent who possesses an intimate knowledge of his people—since he has emerged organically from the populace—Michelet himself has a place within this national story, and therefore becomes inundated by history, metaphysically consumed and overwhelmed by its force. It is for this reason that Barthes refers to him as the *mangeur d'histoire*, as one who walks upon it, devours it, is immersed as he swims in its waters, and ultimately dies of its disease; he is the “manducateur, prêtre et propriétaire de l'Histoire.”⁵¹⁰ Barthes' psychologically penetrating analysis seeks to reveal an unconscious “historical spirit”, a daemon which simultaneously torments Michelet under the guise of a “migraine”, and is responsible for the production of his vast historical œuvre. And because Michelet characterizes the people as *Herr Omnes*, the atomic element of French society, both past and present, his place is firmly within the history he writes, never distinct from it: “Tout au long de l'Histoire micheletiste, il n'y a qu'un seul mode de vie, qui est celui-là même de Michelet.”⁵¹¹

Conceived of in a slightly different way, I would borrow a useful term from the classicist Francis Cornford, who in his brilliant essay on Thucydides employs the sobriquet *Mythistoricus* in reference to the Athenian historian. The meaning of this neologism as it

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 202.

⁵¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), pp. 31-33.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 174-5. As Barthes notes, *Herr Omnes*—“Monseigneur Tout le Monde”—is a term which Michelet borrows from Martin Luther.

pertains to writing history, as Cornford explains, is the idea of “history cast in a mould of conception, whether artistic or philosophic, which, long before the work was even contemplated, was already inwrought into the very structure of the author’s mind.”⁵¹² This implies a sort of preconscious, Aristotelian supposition, wherein a certain type of historian—like Thucydides, and indeed, Michelet—possesses a requisite historical conception before the work itself is realized. As it pertains to Michelet, the theoretical and philosophical background we have covered thus far makes abundantly clear that the French Revolution for him is similar to what the Peloponnesian War was for Thucydides according to Cornford’s reading: a cultural signifier which is so deeply entrenched in his (and by extension the nation’s) psyche that it is all but impossible to understand France and its people without establishing the Revolution as a foundational event, perhaps as the national myth.

Consequently, it is in Michelet’s conception of the Revolution as a national myth that his view of the people is most comprehensively explained. Often invoked in starkly religious terms, the Revolution is described as an act of providence, although in contrast to de Maistre, not under the guise of divine punishment, but of redemption:

Il fallut que ce Dieu eût sa seconde époque, qu’il apparût sur la terre, en son incarnation de 1789. Alors, il donna à l’association sa forme à la fois la plus vaste et la plus vraie, celle qui, seule encore, peut nous réunir, et par nous, sauver le monde.⁵¹³

If the Revolution itself is an act of “divine” will, its preservation in the minds and souls of the people—collective memory, in other words—is the ultimate profession of faith of this new

⁵¹² Francis M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. VIII. See also: Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 36-90.

⁵¹³ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, pp. 216-217.

religion. Michelet thus concludes *Le Peuple* with an appeal to this latent memory, the distillation of a millennium of history, culminating in the greatest act of popular, national self-determination the world has ever seen:

Le jour où, se souvenant qu'elle fut et doit être le salut du genre humain, la France s'entourera de ses enfants et leur enseignera la France, comme foi et comme religion, elle se retrouvera vivante, et solide comme le globe... Et il n'y a pas là de fanatisme; c'est l'expression trop abrégée d'un jugement sérieux, fondé sur une longue étude. Il me serait trop facile de montrer que les autres nations n'ont que des légendes spéciales que le monde n'a pas reçues. Ces légendes, d'ailleurs, ont souvent ce caractère d'être isolées, individuelles, sans lien, comme des points lumineux, éloignés les uns des autres. La légende nationale de France est une traînée de lumière immense, non interrompue, véritable voie lactée sur laquelle le monde eut toujours les yeux.⁵¹⁴

The vaunted place of the French people, Michelet believes, can only be fully realized once the nation is synchronized with its historical tradition, and importantly, when the revolutionary spirit returns to the people. The long study to which he refers above—the *Histoire de France*—shows in painstaking detail and through vivid tableaux each step taken by these very people, toward 1789; the Revolution is the announcement of their arrival and Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution*, as we shall now see, is the author's attempt to construct an eternal monument to their triumph.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 229-230.

Interlude: The People Become the Revolution

In writing *Le Peuple*, Michelet offers an empirical analysis of each French social class (excluding the clergy), providing a detailed portrait of their various idiosyncrasies. At the same time, he deconstructs class *per se*, ultimately rejecting such distinctions and proposing instead a broad vision of national identity, constructed upon a widely shared sense of historical tradition. And while it is not part of the author's historical corpus, *Le Peuple* serves as a sort of skeleton key for understanding his idea of the people in those works—we might think of it as a long-form footnote to the *Histoire de France*. Having outlined Michelet's approach in *Le Peuple*, we can now turn to how his ideas of national identity, as theorized and elaborated in his philosophical essays, are conveyed through his study of the past. To do so, he must reclassify the people, no longer as an abstract concept, but as a tangible, active force in history. This requires first identifying the foundation upon which their unity rests: a shared national history. The people can never hope to attain such a state of cohesion—indeed the nation would cease to be—without a common history that is unmistakably their own. This idea of national unity, constantly evolving in response to historical circumstances, is an essential aspect of Michelet's thought, which Jacques Julliard aptly summarizes, explaining that the unity Michelet evokes is “le résultat d'une longue sédimentation historique, intégrant des éléments singuliers, uniques; de plus c'est une unité en perpétuel devenir, toujours menacée, qui n'appartient à personne, à aucune de ses parties, et que le génie est mieux à même que quiconque d'incarner.”⁵¹⁵ *Une unité en perpétuel devenir*, Michelet's vision of collective identity is a *longue durée* social phenomenon, forming over centuries as successive cultural layers accumulate and coalesce around historical events. And although this identity is present before 1789—evident, for instance, in his writings on the

⁵¹⁵ Jacques Julliard, 'Le Peuple', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 2376.

gothic cathedral as an expression of medieval French identity—it remains somewhat vague, and certainly unrealized, until the Revolution.

It is therefore unsurprising to find in the opening lines of the *Histoire de la Révolution française* an unambiguous overture to national unity, one that closely aligns with the definition Michelet had outlined in his earlier philosophical writings: “La convocation des États Généraux de 1789 est l’ère véritable de la naissance du peuple. Elle appela le peuple tout entier à l’exercice de ses droits.”⁵¹⁶ The *Histoire* introduces the Revolution first by defining it as the moment when the French nation was truly born—that is to say, when the people itself came into being. The motif of national awakening is one which recurs throughout the work, almost as a profession of faith; at each critical juncture of his narration Michelet invokes it like a refrain, as a constant reminder that *fraternité* is a revolutionary first principle. This theme appears again, for example, in the work’s account of the evening of 4 August, when feudal privileges were abolished:

La nuit était avancée, il était 2 heures. Elle emportait cette nuit, l’immense et pénible songe des mille ans du Moyen Âge. L’aube qui commença bientôt, était celle de la liberté. Depuis cette merveilleuse nuit, plus de classes, des Français, plus de provinces, une France!⁵¹⁷

Michelet’s vision of the Revolution as the birth of the people is presented in this passage through a striking interplay of light and darkness, as though centuries of obscurity are abruptly swept away by the radiant dawn of liberty. This scene does not merely signify the collapse of feudal privilege, but evokes the spectacle of a new social organization, one in which barriers and distinctions, particularly of class, appear momentarily to dissolve into a unified, national identity.

⁵¹⁶ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 69.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 202.

Michelet's somewhat idealized treatment of the Revolution's early phase does not profess the dissolution merely of class distinctions, however. So too does he exalt the integration of women into public politics, and their emergence as a formidable contingent whose actions were no less consequential than their male compatriots. Evident, as we have seen already in his treatment of figures like Charlotte Corday and Madame Roland, Michelet also emphasizes the integral contributions of women generally in propelling the Revolution forward. We see this clearly expressed in his framing of the events of 6 October 1789, when thousands of desperate Parisian women marched on Versailles, compelling the King and Queen to return to Paris. Michelet describes this moment as both spontaneous and popular, a sort of female *prise de la Bastille*, whose consequences were no less pivotal in shaping the Revolution's trajectory: "La révolution du 6 octobre, nécessaire, naturelle et légitime, s'il en fut jamais, toute spontanée, imprévue, vraiment populaire, appartient surtout aux femmes, comme celle du 14 juillet aux hommes. Les hommes ont pris la Bastille, et les femmes ont pris le Roi."⁵¹⁸

The sort of overtures to national unity that Michelet describes, on the night of 4 August or the women's march of 6 October, reach a culmination in the Fête de la Fédération, a celebration in which the Revolution, now transfigured into an organic ritual, offers a vision of France as a unified whole. In this moment, the people—liberated from the vestiges of feudalism—come together in a communion of fraternity, their divisions momentarily erased. For Michelet, this is not merely a political gathering but a revelation—a moment of national transubstantiation in which the Revolution's highest ideal is made manifest: "Il n'y a plus ni riche, ni pauvre, ni noble, ni roturier; les vivres sont en commun, les tables communes. Les divisions sociales, les discordes ont disparu. Les ennemis se réconcilient, les sectes opposées fraternisent, les croyants, les philosophes, les protestants, les catholiques."⁵¹⁹ Here, in this fleeting concord, Michelet envisions the *mirabilis hora* of the

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 261.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 369.

Revolution, a sublime event in which the fractures of history seem to dissolve; in his grand vision of a national mythos, the people behold themselves in this moment, at last as one.

The (Un)holy Foule

Michelet's historiographical construct of a revolutionary "heroic age" extends in earnest well into 1792, certainly through to the *journée insurrectionnelle* of 20 June and the informal establishment of the First Republic on 10 août. As we have seen in his representation of the important events discussed already, the *Histoire* treats this period as emblematic of a spontaneous, popular expression of the unified political will, what Leuwers *et al.* describe as "Celui pendant lequel la foule fait la révolution, résout les crises, tranche les attermoiements, élargit et humanise les horizons."⁵²⁰ The people, in other words, were the Revolution's protagonists during this time; in control of their political destiny, they behaved more like an organized, rational constituency than a frenzied rabble. This point is important, for although these moments include large gatherings of citizens in an ostensibly "mob-like" way—Michelet does on occasion use *foule* as a synonym for *le peuple*—nowhere in the text is it suggested that their actions descend into the sort of irrationality or arbitrary violence that we commonly associate with the word. To the contrary, Michelet's "people" tend to resist the impulses of mob justice, as we see for example in the way the text depicts 20 June, 1792, when a mass of ostensibly enraged demonstrators storms the Tuileries, effectively capturing the King. Yet no harm was brought to him; the scene represents for Michelet further evidence of the people's goodness, of their inherent rationality and virtue:

La foule comprenait très bien que le Roi ne ferait rien, et elle entraînait en fureur.

Plusieurs de colère ou d'ivresse, faisaient mine de se jeter sur lui. Ils le menaçaient

⁵²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1222.

de loin avec des sabres et des épées. Voulaient-ils le tuer? La chose eût été bien facile; le Roi avait peu de monde autour de lui, et plusieurs des assaillants, ayant des pistolets, pouvaient l'atteindre à distance.—Il est trop évident que personne, au 20 juin, n'avait encore cette pensée.⁵²¹

The imagery here, of a *de facto* seizure of sovereignty from the tyrannical Louis XVI by a benevolent citizenry, signals the apotheosis of the latter and an abrupt, rather unceremonious end for the king. This implicit transfer of power, as Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin explains, “sanctionne l’irruption des masses dans l’espace politique républicain—l’insurrection du 20 juin (et du 10 août) définissant l’exercice légitime de la démocratie directe, en cas de défaillance des pouvoirs constitués.”⁵²² Michelet’s imperative here is to show that the people, having finally wrested their liberty from the grips of the *Ancien Régime*, remain virtuous and do not resort to vengeance or retribution; certainly they do not don the robes of their former masters. This is not to suggest that the people are depicted as nonviolent, for as Michelet later notes, “Le peuple de Paris y fut l’organe violent, mais le légitime organe du sentiment de la France.”⁵²³ But should we interpret a statement like this as an apology for—or indeed as a whitewashing of—violence on the condition that it is dispatched according to the legitimate will of the masses? Alternatively, might we understand Michelet’s view of revolutionary violence more generally as a direct function of his unwavering faith in the historical myth he is writing? In other words, that the *Histoire* is less a distortion of the facts than it is the author’s earnest perspective of events, and importantly his true devotion to the revolutionary creed. The clearest answer to this question can be found, in my view, in the way he discusses the Revolution of 10 août.

⁵²¹ *Ibid*, p. 914.

⁵²² Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin, ‘Le peuple souverain: le 20 juin 1792 (Michelet, Dumas), in Quentin Deluermoz and Anthony Glinoeer, *L’Insurrection entre histoire et littérature (1789-1014)*, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015), p. 41.

⁵²³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 919.

“Je ne connais aucun événement des temps anciens ni modernes qui ait été plus complètement défiguré que le 10 août, plus altéré dans ces circonstances essentielles, plus chargé et obscurci d’accessoires légendaires ou mensongers.”⁵²⁴ Michelet’s chapter on *10 août* opens not with subtlety and restraint, but with a polemical broadside; other historians and writers are not simply wrong in their interpretations of this event, they are guilty of a libel against the nation. The chapter’s introductory polemic has in its crosshairs the purveyors of “ces fausses traditions”, be they memoirists like Barbaroux, Weber, and Peltier, those who “n’ont pris part à la Bataille, et ne l’ont même pas vue”, or the unnamed historians, “grands artistes” who have buried the truth under their “fausses traditions.”⁵²⁵

Unnamed, yet the passage might well have been directly addressed to Lamartine, whose *Histoire des Girondins* depicts *10 août* in a radically different light than Michelet does; their respective portrayals of insurrectionist violence produce two contrasting images of the day. The difference in the way Michelet and Lamartine approach popular violence in their representations, according to Ann Rigney, is evident in both style and substance. Consider first Lamartine who, as Rigney explains, narrates the series of killings as continuous and repetitive; each instance of violence is linked to all the others, “not so much as elements in an unfolding sequence of events, as different instances of the same unmotivated, relentless bloodshed directed against the king’s supporters.”⁵²⁶ Unsurprisingly, violence is the dominant motif of Lamartine’s *10 août*: “Any non-violent episodes which are briefly mentioned are simply ‘incidental’ *vis-à-vis* the central action: momentary deviations which swerve, by way of contrast, to highlight the atrocities and to underscore the constant pattern as it re-emerges with increased force.”⁵²⁷ The operative word here is “atrocities”, for this loaded characterization is what ultimately distinguishes Lamartine from Michelet, and is

⁵²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 950.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 950-1.

⁵²⁶ Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 84.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid*.

therefore at the heart of the latter's attack. More specifically, Lamartine's portrayal of the Swiss guard as brave and disciplined, duty-bound victims of a vicious mob, as we see in the following, subtly asserts a sort of moral asymmetry between the two opposing sides of the conflict, which of course is largely (and deliberately) absent from Michelet's account; Lamartine almost favors the king's defenders:

Le combat commença par un jeu: le rire préluda à la mort. Des hommes du peuple, armés de longues hallebardes à lames recourbées, s'approchèrent du factionnaire, l'accrochèrent par son uniforme ou par son ceinturon avec le crochet de leur pique, et, l'attirant de force à eux aux bruyants éclats de joie de la foule, le désarmèrent et le firent prisonnier. Cinq fois les Suisses renouvelèrent leur sentinelle; cinq fois le peuple s'en empara ainsi. Les bruyantes acclamations des vainqueurs et la vue de ces cinq Suisses désarmés encourageant la foule qui hésitait jusque-là au milieu de la cour, elle se précipita en masse avec de grands cris sous la voûte; là, quelques hommes féroces, arrachant les Suisses des mains des premiers assaillants, assommèrent ces soldats sans armes à coups de massue en présence de leurs camarades. Un premier coup de feu partit au même moment de la cour ou d'une fenêtre, les uns disent du fusil d'un Suisse, les autres du pistolet d'un Marseillais. Ce coup de feu fut le signal de l'engagement.⁵²⁸

It should be noted that although he was certainly no enemy of the Revolution, the emphasis Lamartine places here on mob violence does suggest that he views *10 août* as a day which must be understood primarily through the lens of its brutality. To call it a battle, as Michelet does, is to fundamentally mischaracterize the event's reality, the people's depravity.

⁵²⁸ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2014) 2 (2 vols), p. 669.

Lamartine's phrasing, as we see a little later in the account, further emphasizes the perspective advanced in his narrative:

Quatre-vingts cadavres jonchaient l'escalier. De ce moment le combat ne fut plus qu'un massacre. Les Marseillais, les Brestois, les fédérés, le peuple, inondent les appartements. Les Suisses isolés qu'ils rencontrent sont immolés partout; quelques-uns essayent de se défendre, et ne font qu'ajouter à la rage de leurs bourreaux et aux horreurs de leur supplice. La plupart jettent leurs armes au pied du peuple, se mettent à genoux, tendent la tête au coup ou demandent la vie; on les saisit par les jambes et par les bras, on les lance tout vivants par les fenêtres. Un peloton de dix-sept d'entre eux s'était réfugié dans la sacristie de la chapelle. Ils y sont découverts. En vain l'état de leurs armes, qu'ils montrent au peuple, atteste qu'ils n'ont pas fait feu de la journée. On les désarme, on les déshabille, et on les égorge aux cris de: "Vive la nation!" Pas un n'échappe.⁵²⁹

Not simply a battle, but indeed a sequence of massacres; his precise use of this word highlights for us, in the most general sense, the fundamental difference between the two historians' perspectives. Lamartine's account is written in a vernacular which emphasizes terror; corpses litter the tableau; the scene is, quite literally, painted in blood:

Le sang ruisselait partout; on ne marchait que sur des cadavres. La mort même ne suffisait pas à la haine. Un ressentiment féroce poursuivait au-delà de la vie l'assouvissement de cette rage; elle dépravait la nature, elle ravalait le peuple au-dessous de la brute, qui frappe, mais qui ne dépèce pas.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 677.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 682.

At the heart of Lamartine's description is of course the revolutionary mob; uninterested in pillaging their newly conquered kingdom, they are singularly focused on violence, almost for its own sake: "Le peuple même, dans sa férocité, aurait rougi de chercher autre chose que ses ennemis. Le but de son soulèvement, c'était le sang; ce n'était pas l'or."⁵³¹

Although his representation of *10 août* is noticeably different than Lamartine's—in terms of style, tempo, and the emphasis he places on certain details over others—Michelet's point of contention lies primarily in the way Lamartine characterizes the people's actions, rather less on the accuracy of the "facts". It is not so much a question, for example, of whether the Swiss guards were massacred, since Michelet does use the word himself; rather, it is a matter of the word's meaning in context. Where Lamartine highlights the brutality of the revolutionary forces, especially towards the defeated royal guard, Michelet responds by constructing the entire scene around the premise that any massacres were the result first of chaos caused, to some extent, by the righteous anger of the people and, importantly, by a breakdown of order among the enemy ranks. His phrasing is also notable, for its use of the passive voice further obscures the peoples' responsibility for their violent actions, thus complicating their direct, "active" involvement and dispersing complicity into the ether.

Ultimately though, "The rout of the Swiss guard" in Michelet's view was, according to Rigney, "the outcome of an intelligible sequence of events with a beginning, middle, and end: *the result of a fair fight*."⁵³² Furthermore, the collapse of the royalist defense and their subsequent slaughter signals the imminent collapse of the monarchy itself, as Michelet implies in the following:

L'effrayante unanimité de la garde nationale, qui, de moment en moment, se manifestait aux Suisses, acheva de les briser. Arrivés près du grand bassin, vers la

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

⁵³² Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 85.

place Louis XV, leurs rangs flottèrent, ils commencèrent à se débander; la mortelle pensée du salut individuel, qui perd presque toujours les hommes, entra visiblement en eux. Ils virent ou crurent voir que leur courage, leur discipline admirable, les avait perdus, en ralentissant leur retraite. Quelques centaines se lancèrent, comme des cerfs furieux, sous le couvert des grands arbres, renversèrent les tirailleurs ennemis, gagnèrent la porte qui est en face de la rue Saint-Florentin: trois cents environ échappèrent; un groupe, serré de trop près, se jeta dans l'hôtel de la marine; ils y furent cherchés, égorgés. Ceux qui restèrent mieux ensemble essayèrent, des Tuileries, de passer aux Champs-Élysées; mais à peine eurent-ils posé le pied sur la place qu'un bataillon de Saint-Marceau, qui avait deux pièces en batterie à la descente du pont, leur tira un coup à mitraille, un seul coup, qui en mit trente-quatre sur le carreau. Les autres, dispersés par cette terrible exécution, jetèrent leurs fusils, mirent le sabre à la main, arme inutile contre les piques de leurs ennemis acharnés. Une trentaine tinrent un instant près de la statue de Louis XV (où est maintenant l'obélisque), au pied de ce triste monument de la monarchie, si peu digne de leur dévouement et de leur fidélité.⁵³³

Michelet's interpretation of these events advances the broader socio-historiographical project of his œuvre, to reawaken in the people a sense of national unity around the historical memory of the Revolution. More specifically, by correcting the historical record regarding *10 août*, so too will the people be rehabilitated, their sacred role as heroic defenders of the Revolution restored. Having established earlier in the chapter the necessity and legitimacy of the people's violence, the scene thus ends with a final refutation of this libel, by way of an anecdote taken from the first-hand account of Pierre-Alexis Singier. As in Lamartine's account, Michelet's description of the scene follows the mob as they ransack the

⁵³³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, pp. 981-2.

royal quarters, destroying “les meubles et les jetait par les fenêtres”, until they encounter “un magnifique clavecin, orné de peintures précieuses, allait avoir le même sort.”⁵³⁴ Where Lamartine’s distorted representation continues to stress the mob’s violent intent, however, Michelet offers a more jubilant alternative, one which culminates with a song: “Voilà tous ces hommes furieux, sanglants, qui oublient leur fureur au moment même; ils font chorus, se rangent autour du clavecin, se mettent à danser en rond, et répètent l’hymne national.”⁵³⁵

Michelet’s representation of *10 août* is—with the exception, perhaps of the Bastille—the most lucid exploration of national myth of any scene in the *Histoire de la Révolution française*. The social philosophy which he had proposed and elaborated in *Le Peuple*, of a national identity constructed around a collective memory of the Revolution, one which transcends all social divisions, finds its perfect embodiment in the insurrectionist mob. Indeed, Michelet observes in this spontaneous gathering a confirmation of his ideal, as we see in his final musing on the day:

Cette foule, si mêlée, des vainqueurs du 10 août, n’était pas, comme on l’a tant dit, une bande de brigands, de barbares. C’était le peuple tout entier; toute condition, toute nature, et tout caractère se rencontraient là, sans nul doute. Les passions les plus furieuses s’y trouvèrent; mais les basses, les ignobles, rien n’indique qu’en ce moment d’exaltation héroïque elles se soient montrées chez personne. Il y eut beaucoup d’actes magnanimes. . . Le péril, qui rend si souvent féroces les hommes qui l’affrontent pour la première fois, n’avait nullement éteint dans le cœur des assaillants les sentiments d’humanité.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 982.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 982-3.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 983.

By humanizing the mob in this manner the author intends to strip away, once and for all, the caustic “anti-myths” which had defaced the people’s—along with the broader Revolution’s—memory throughout the preceding five decades, thus supplanting these deleterious perversions with the establishment of a sublime alternative, one which situates those heroic citizens centrally in the Revolution’s cause-effect paradigm: “nul en particulier ne peut se vanter du 10 août, ni l’Assemblée, ni les Jacobins, ni la Commune. Le 10 août, comme le 14 juillet et le 6 octobre, est un grand acte du peuple.”⁵³⁷

From Many, One

In the *Histoire*’s narrative reconstruction of the Revolution, 10 août signals for Michelet either—or perhaps simultaneously—the apogee of the period’s heroic age, or the beginning of its decline. But a decline into what? Certainly not, like some historians and writers we have discussed—Germaine de Staël, for example, along with other, more moderate voices—as the end, or the betrayal of the Revolution of 1789 and its principles. At the same time, it is evident that there is a discernible, yet subtle and gradual, thematic shift in Michelet’s narrative focus which, as others have noted, begins more explicitly around the events of August and September of 1792. From this point in the text, the abstract conception of the people, as a collective embodiment of the Revolution’s national spirit—as *l’acteur collectif*—is increasingly subsumed and atomized, reallocated into smaller groups or by individuals. That *âge héroïque* of the Revolution, previously represented in the broad, popular movements of the people becomes, “dans les tomes qui suivent... l’exception.”⁵³⁸

This is not to say that the people disappear entirely henceforth; as we saw already in the previous chapter with his treatment of Charlotte Corday, Michelet does at times

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 938.

⁵³⁸ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 1222.

construct the Revolution's "great men" as symbols of a broader identity. We are reminded of the way the text phrases Corday's legacy and influence, as patron saint of *la religion du poignard*, thus implying a collectivized ideological, quasi-religious sentiment that the author fashions around her mythologized image. The emergence and increased frequency of this type of framing is not abrupt, however; it does not correspond perfectly with a decline of "the people" in August of 1792. We find it already much earlier in the *Histoire*, for example, in the figurative and literal pantheonization of Mirabeau, who as Michelet explains was, in the twilight of his life "l'organe même du peuple, la voix de la Révolution."⁵³⁹ Like he would do later with Corday, Michelet uses Mirabeau, upon his death in April of 1791, to signify the birth of a civic creed; the Revolution's first temple, the newly completed Panthéon, becomes Mirabeau's eternal resting place. The entire scene of Mirabeau's apotheosis, as we see below, affirms his status as a monument to the Revolution and importantly, as a symbol of the people:

Le 3 avril, le département de Paris se présenta à l'Assemblée nationale, demanda, obtint que l'église de Sainte-Geneviève fût consacrée à la sépulture des grands hommes, et que Mirabeau y fût placé le premier. Sur le fronton devaient être inscrits ces mots: "Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante." Descartes y était. Voltaire et Rousseau devaient y venir. "Beau décret! dit Camille Desmoulins. Il y a mille sectes et mille églises entre les nations, et, dans une même nation, le Saint des saints pour l'un est l'abomination pour l'autre. Mais, pour ce temple et ses reliques, il n'y aura pas de disputes. Cette basilique réunira tous les hommes à sa religion." Le 4 avril eut lieu la pompe funèbre la plus vaste, la plus populaire qu'il y ait eu au monde, avant celle de Napoléon, au 15 décembre 1840. Le peuple seul fit la police et la fit admirablement. Nul accident dans cette foule de trois ou quatre

⁵³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 521.

cent mille hommes. Les rues, les boulevards, les fenêtres, les toits, les arbres, étaient chargés de spectateurs.⁵⁴⁰

It is not enough simply to explain this scene by saying that Mirabeau was an important leader of the Revolution, that he was no more than a consequential historical figure; this can be taken for granted in the eulogy. Instead, Michelet reimagines him as a revolutionary monument: “Sacré par la Révolution, identifié avec elle, avec nous par conséquent, nous ne pouvons dégrader cet homme sans nous dégrader nous-mêmes, sans découronner la France.”⁵⁴¹

Returning to the idea alluded to above, that the text changes the way it treats the people’s role after the events of *10 août*—transitioning away from the explicitly “popular” view, where the Revolution is led more or less directly by the masses, towards one where factions, groups, and indeed individuals are depicted as representations of the general will—it might be said that Michelet employs this thematic shift as a way to reconcile his philosophical vision of the people with the historical and political reality of the Revolution, post-1792. Mostly gone is the age of spontaneous popular action, but the sentiment itself persists largely as a representative phenomenon. This we see frequently in the latter books of the *Histoire*, as for instance in the person of Vergniaud, the celebrated Girondin orator who the text briefly anoints, after *10 août* and the September massacres, as the “pontife de la Révolution.”⁵⁴² By assuming this role, Michelet explains, Vergniaud becomes in some sense, *mutatis mutandis*, what the people have represented: the embodied spirit of the Revolution. This is particularly true on the eve of the republican victory at Valmy:

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 533.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 536.

⁵⁴² *Ibid*, p. 1103.

Il avait trouvé, donné la formule religieuse du dévouement héroïque. Ainsi, dans les vieilles batailles de Rome, quand la victoire balançait, quand les légions chancelaient, le pontife, en blancs habits, s'avancait au front de l'armée et prononçait les paroles du rite sacré; un homme se présentait. Décius ou Curtius, qui répétait mot pour mot et se donnait pour le peuple. Ici, Vergniaud fut le pontife; mais ce ne fut pas un homme qui répéta la formule, ce fut tout le peuple même. La France fut Décius.⁵⁴³

Vergniaud spoke and the entire nation echoed in his oration, because his word was that of the people, in opposition primarily to the dual tyrannies, namely the monarchy in its last gasp, and the emergent Commune. He is not revered in the text, it should be stressed, merely as a political representative, but as the personification of the nation, for whom he spoke.

The text imposes a reflected image of the nation onto someone like Vergniaud, Mirabeau, or indeed Corday because, according to Michelet's view, they are *of the people* and therefore living embodiments of the Revolution. Through temporal action—whether by word or deed—each of these examples displays the author's idea of the revolutionary spirit at a particular point in its story. This motif is also used to great effect by the author to signal broader historical trends; much like the people function as the very embodiment of the Revolution in its early phase, individuals tend to serve this purpose later in the text. Danton is one such example; in the face of foreign invasion, as Michelet explains,

Danton fut, il faut le dire, dans ce moment sublime et sinistre, la voix même de la Révolution et de la France; en lui elle trouva le cœur énergique, la poitrine profonde, l'attitude grandiose qui pouvait exprimer sa foi. Qu'on ne dise pas que la

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

parole soit peu de chose en de tels moments. Parole et acte, c'est tout un. La puissante, l'énergique affirmation qui assure les cœurs, c'est une création d'actes; ce qu'elle dit, elle le produit. L'action est ici la servante de la parole; elle vient docilement derrière, comme au premier jour du monde: *Il dit, et le monde fut.*⁵⁴⁴

Danton ascends in this moment, as a sort of deity of the Revolution; his apotheosis in the passage above correlates directly with the very birth of the Republic, along with its first major victory over a foreign invasion at Valmy. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that upon his death, on 5 April 1794, Danton is venerated in similarly divine terms, although the tone understandably shifts to a far more tragic one: "Il avait été... l'énergie sublime, la vie de la Révolution, le cœur de la République, et elle mourait en lui."⁵⁴⁵

Observing the way Michelet resurrects a figure such as Danton or Vergniaud, how he steeps their memory in a sublime grandeur, we can see an unambiguous response to his lament from the *Histoire*'s preface. Where, according to his view no monument to the Revolution had endured throughout the intervening five decades—save perhaps for the Champ de Mars—there is now the emblazoned image of the Revolution's heroes, rescued by France's poet-historian from distortion or worse, from *oubli*. The memory of each figure is roused anew as a meticulously crafted representation of the nation's, which is to say, the people's, identity. But there arises, at this precise phase of the Revolution, the complicated and delicate nature of identity in light of a fracturing polis and the intensifying civil conflict. To this end, in what way does the text deal with counterrevolutionary memory? Where does the royalist opposition—no less French than its republican enemy—fit into Michelet's historical monument? How, for instance should the Vendée or Chouan uprisings, those tragic theaters of civil war, be incorporated into the national mythos? For some of Michelet's contemporaries, these internal conflicts provided a thematic foundation for

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1018.

⁵⁴⁵ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 2, p. 808.

which to engage with questions of revolutionary memory, and of national identity more generally. Among these, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, in *l'Enfermée* (1852), uses the Chouannerie as a thematic base from which to explore, in the Scottian tradition, what he describes as the “véritable Histoire, non celle des cartons et des chancelleries, mais l'Histoire orale, le discours, la tradition vivante.”⁵⁴⁶ Images of burned churches and desecrated religious monuments, along with the first-hand accounts of persecuted clergy, litter Barbey's tableau of the war and its aftermath, thus leaving little ambiguity in terms of his own counterrevolutionary sympathies. And yet, Barbey's appeal to a living tradition makes clear that his fiction is not deliberately partisan, but an attempt at historical myth, albeit one told primarily from one—i.e. the royalist—perspective.

Barbey was of course not the only novelist to draw on the theme of civil war in his work; we find it also in Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846), where the scene of Maréchal Hulot's funeral procession reinvokes memories of the war some five decades after the fact. Introduced originally as an heroic republican soldier in *Les Chouans*, Hulot's funeral ties one of Balzac's final novels to his first, while offering in this miniature a stirring, if not idealistic, image of revolutionary memory in 1840s French society:

Pour les républicains, le maréchal était l'idéal du patriotisme; aussi se trouvèrent-ils tous à son convoi, qui fut suivi d'une foule immense. L'Armée, l'Administration, la Cour, le Peuple, tout le monde vint rendre hommage à cette haute vertu, à cette intacte probité, à cette gloire si pure... Derrière le cercueil du maréchal on vit le vieux marquis de Montauran, le frère de celui qui, dans la levée de boucliers des Chouans en 1799, avait été l'adversaire et l'adversaire malheureux de Hulot. Le

⁵⁴⁶ Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *l'Enfermée*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 17.

marquis, en mourant sous les balles des Bleus, avait confié les intérêts de son jeune frère au soldat de la République.⁵⁴⁷

In the context of the novel's drama, the Maréchal represents an indictment of contemporary France and its *mœurs*, of the vices of debauchery and speculation, which are personified in his brother, the reprobate Baron Hulot d'Evry. But while this generational contrast is exploited in the scene, the division between opposing sides of the civil war is all but erased. And while Balzac does gesture toward a form of closure—bringing together former enemies in a symbolic act of national homage—his depiction ultimately remains somewhat more rooted in personal virtue than ideological resolution. The Revolution and counterrevolution are not overtly harmonized, in other words, but individuals may nevertheless transcend their historical roles. Michelet, as a progenitor of national myth is faced with the more challenging task of simultaneously presenting both sides as French and therefore deserving of some dignity and respect according to the basic precepts of national identity, while ultimately privileging the republican struggle for national unity over the counterinsurgent, royalist drive for a restoration of monarchical rule. And this fragmenting of the revolutionary landscape is precisely why sustaining that unified image of the people leading the Revolution becomes a more precarious task as the narrative progresses, because the very idea of the people becomes vaguer and more subjective.

Michelet solves for this problem in part by shifting some blame for rebellion in the Vendée away from the people who fought and supported the royalist cause, instead laying it squarely at the feet of the priestly class. Loyal in principle and practice to a foreign kingdom, the clergy is portrayed as a subversive cabal, a network of agitators intent on sowing discord and thus working to impede the nation's progress. This explanation allows Michelet to

⁵⁴⁷ Honoré de Balzac, *La Cousine Bette*, in *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981) 7, p. 353.

approach the Vendéens with rather less contempt, for as we see in the following, they are essentially patriots who have fallen under spell of Church propaganda:

La propagande fanatique qui travaillait les Vendéens avait son centre à Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre, près de Montaigu. De là, nous l'avons déjà dit, par les *Sœurs de la sagesse* et autres dévots émissaires, s'étendait par le pays cette publicité mystérieuse de fausses nouvelles et de faux miracles, qui, circulant sans contrôle dans ces populations dispersées, pouvait faire activement fermenter l'imagination solitaire, préparer l'explosion.⁵⁴⁸

The author's use of *fanatique* in this context is critical and provides a basis for how the text distinguishes the two sides of the conflict. Although both are driven by ideology, *Les Bleus* act in accordance with the precepts of patriotic duty, while the brainwashed insurrectionists are cruel and treat enemy suffering as an end in itself. "Une différence essentielle", according to Michelet, is observable

Entre la violence révolutionnaire et celle de ces fanatiques animés des fureurs des prêtres, c'est que la première, en tuant, ne voulait rien autre chose qu'être quitte de l'ennemi. L'autre, fidèle à l'esprit de la férocité sacrée des temps de l'Inquisition, voulait moins tuer que faire souffrir, faire expier, tirer de l'homme (pauvre créature finie) d'infinies douleurs, de quoi venger Dieu!⁵⁴⁹

To exemplify this alleged moral asymmetry between the sides, Michelet relates to us the anecdote of a young boy who, while mourning over his patriot father's corpse, "cria: 'Vive

⁵⁴⁸ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 2, p. 266.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 274.

la nation!’ jusqu’à ce qu’il eût été percé de vingt baïonnettes.”⁵⁵⁰ The purpose of this brief story is not, however, to villainize the memory of the Vendéens, but to counterbalance decades of pernicious royalist mythmaking.

Here we see that the *Histoire*, invested though it is in creating an historical myth of the Revolution, views defeating the propagation of these false royalist monuments as an equally important part of that larger project. The author thus implores his readers to reconsider the veracity of these duplicitous antirevolutionary screeds, which they have perhaps come to accept as gospel, or at least taken as based in truth: “Lisez les doucereuses idylles des écrivains royalistes, vous serez tentés de croire que les insurgés ont été des saints, qu’à la longue seulement, forcés par les barbaries des républicains, ils ont exercé des vengeances et tiré des représailles.”⁵⁵¹ Much like his treatment of *10 août*, Michelet challenges what is, in his view, spurious propaganda; the counter to this sort of pernicious legend, which only degrades the memory of the people through its distortions and occasional half-truths, is earnest historical myth.

Of The People?

If the ultimate purpose of Michelet’s decade of labor was not made perfectly clear by the preceding two thousand pages of the *Histoire*, his brief conclusion—which, he writes, “est elle-même un livre”—restates at its outset the principal motivation for his work, that

Toute histoire de la Révolution jusqu’ici était essentiellement monarchique. (Telle pour Louis XVI, telle pour Robespierre.) Celle-ci est la première républicaine,

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 273.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 274.

celle qui a brisé les idoles et les dieux. De la première page à la dernière, elle n'a eu qu'un héros: le peuple.⁵⁵²

Throughout the text he has upheld this axiom by defending the people, reestablishing their central place in the story of the Revolution, and waging intellectual warfare against their enemies and detractors. What is left, he surely hopes, is a monument which honors their accomplishments. But the *Histoire* is not meant simply to stand as an historical relic, for it is a literary work written about the people and, importantly, *to* the people.

To characterize his work as *républicaine* is not a statement only of political allegiance, but of perspective and design. Michelet professes to write for the nation, in a vernacular familiar to his fellow countryman, so that today's reader may find inspiration to become tomorrow's historian. Reflecting on his account of *10 août*, Michelet elaborates this conceptual process by which his scions might expand upon the historical myth. Noting its boundless potential once the patriotic reader is stirred by inspiration, he explains:

Le premier mouvement est d'écrire, de communiquer à la mémoire ces héroïques efforts, ces élans divins de la volonté. Plus on les recueille, plus on en raconte, plus on en trouve à raconter. Le découragement vient alors; l'admiration, sans s'épuiser, se lasse et se tait. Laissons-les, ces grandes choses que nos pères ont faites ou voulues pour l'affranchissement du monde, laissons-les au dépôt sacré où rien ne se perd, la profonde mémoire du peuple, qui, jusque dans chaque village, garde son histoire héroïque; confions-les à la justice du Dieu de la liberté, dont la France fut le bras en ce grand jour, et qui récompensera ces choses (c'est notre foi) dans les mondes ultérieurs.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵² Ibid, p. 991.

⁵⁵³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1, p. 1014.

To write, in this context, is to partake in the only means of consecrating the national myth; unlike the monarchy there is nothing inherently sublime about postrevolutionary democratic institutions, since they are profane by definition, and therefore ephemeral. But the people, as Michelet—like Vico before him—attempted to show in his decades of writing, enjoy a sacred role as progenitors of postrevolutionary society and its historical myths. They might succeed at transcending their own impermanence of course by writing, but also (and perhaps first), as readers. “Everything depended”, as Linda Orr explains, “on the reader, who occupied the same position in historiography as the people in democratic society. Authority came first and last from the popular reader, defined no less paradoxically than that enigma, *le peuple*.”⁵⁵⁴ Michelet labours to create the people, to breathe life into his creation by communicating to them their own story; to *popularize* their historical myths. But this project would prove more elusive and, as we shall see, tormented Michelet for the remainder of his his life.

⁵⁵⁴ Linda Orr, *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 86.

General Conclusion

“Si l’on ouvre mon cœur à ma mort, on lira l’idée qui m’a suivie: ‘Comment viendront les livres populaires?’”⁵⁵⁵ Written in *Nos fils* (1869), one of Michelet’s final publications before his death in 1876, the elder historian betrays a profound anxiety, a nagging concern that despite his best attempts the people, their spirit, and importantly, their language, remain beyond his reach:

Je suis né peuple, j’avais le peuple dans le cœur. Les monuments de ses vieux âges ont été mon ravissement. J’ai pu en 46 poser le droit du peuple plus qu’on ne fit jamais; en 64 sa longue tradition religieuse. Mais sa langue, sa langue, elle m’était inaccessible. Je n’ai pas pu le faire parler.⁵⁵⁶

Having spent much of his career in pursuit of his fellow citizen, trying to appeal through his many publications to some innate sense of national identity, it is perhaps surprising to hear the eminent historian concede the possible shortcomings of his life’s work.⁵⁵⁷ As his writings of the 1840s already make clear, Michelet had a profound and earnest belief that the nation’s great writers would emerge, like himself, from among the masses. And yet the intervening decades did not, in his view, fulfil the hopes articulated in *Le Peuple* and elsewhere. Despite the popular revolutionary spirit which had, for instance, ultimately brought about the end of the July Monarchy, there was no corresponding literary revolution, at least none that was

⁵⁵⁵ Jules Michelet, *Nos fils*, (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1891), p. 299.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 300.

⁵⁵⁷ An early advocate, for instance, of “colportage in service of the republic”, Michelet viewed this sort of publication as a means of reaching a public who was not, according to Edward Berenson, particularly inclined to reading. See: Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1852*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 130.

apparent to Michelet's discerning eye. Recounting an exchange with Béranger, he laments that no great writer of the people existed in 1848, and that none has emerged since:

Après l'horrible et ténébreuse affaire du 24 juin 48, courbé, accablé de douleurs, je dis à Béranger: "Oh! qui saura parler au peuple? lui faire les nouveaux évangiles? Sans cela nous mourons." Cet esprit ferme et froid répondit: "Patience! ce sont eux qui feront leur livres." Dix-huit ans sont passés. Et ces livres, où sont-ils?⁵⁵⁸

Michelet's view of the writer's sacred, pedagogical mission is stated unambiguously; his concern for the future of French society and for its popular literature appears bound up in a cause-effect relationship, wherein the latter evidently guides and enlightens the former. As Lionel Gossman explains, Michelet "was haunted by the idea of the *livre populaire*" throughout his life, driven to his work by the prophetic mission "of bringing the French people to a full awareness of itself, articulating its unconscious thoughts, and teaching it what it indeed already knew but could not, without his help, know clearly and consciously."⁵⁵⁹ *Le Peuple* set about to define, then rouse his target readership; the *Histoire de France* revealed its ancient origins, and the *Histoire de la Révolution française* bestowed upon this people its foundational myth, situating them at the helm of their destiny—*l'humanité qui se crée*. Does this exchange with Béranger amount, therefore, to a confession of failure? While Michelet had undoubtedly achieved great commercial success throughout his career, his popularity was predominantly, as Gossman notes, among the bourgeoisie: "Michelet himself always hoped that his books would be popular, and it was with regret and some self-recrimination that he acknowledged they never reached the masses."⁵⁶⁰ I shall conclude this

⁵⁵⁸ Michelet, *Nos fils*, p. 300.

⁵⁵⁹ Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 167.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 187. According to Gossman, "The Bird went through seven printings in four years and by 1867 had sold 33,000 copies; the first printing of *The Sea* in 1861 called for 24,000 copies; there were seven printings of *The Mountain* in the year it first appeared. *Love*, written for the same public and in the same vein,

study with a brief inquiry into the question of mid-nineteenth-century popular literature as it relates to the idea of the Revolution as a national myth, how it perhaps challenges some of the conclusions drawn in my thesis, or offers a path for future research to explore.

In the previous chapter I endeavored to show how Michelet constructed his narrative history of the French Revolution with the intention that it become the preeminent national myth, the most comprehensive attempt at such, in my view, to appear during the five decades which separated his work from the event of interest. We can therefore infer from the author's conception and execution that the *Histoire* was by its design intended to be a *livre Populaire*, but what exactly does this term imply? Natalie Zemon Davis provides us with a concise definition of the related, generalized conception of "popular culture" in reference specifically to Michelet's work, as "the values, beliefs, customs, rituals and associations of peasants or of artisans and working people of the city."⁵⁶¹ In her study, Zemon Davis describes Michelet as a sort of anthropologist, who defines culture "by its relation to the lives and purposes of a specified social group."⁵⁶² Since he is concerned with what is popular to the French people—a single, cohesive nation, by his definition—we can conclude that the *livre Populaire* and popular culture more generally refers, in this context, to books and other cultural objects embraced and consumed by this broad, yet united social group. The *Histoire de la Révolution française* undoubtedly falls into this category of book, at least according to its author's designs, but by his own admission it was not received as such—at least not to the extent he had hoped—by the popular classes. This is not to say that the Revolution was of

though not strictly a natural history book, sold 30,000 copies in two months. These works were thus far more popular than any Michelet had written before, but not in the sense of the *livre populaire* that had haunted him in the 1840s. They were bought and read by the bourgeoisie and by the vast new petty-bourgeois reading public created by universal education and increasing prosperity, and they were in no way comparable with the polemical writings of the 1840s. The lessons they taught were on the whole compatible with current bourgeois views about progress, science, and the role of women." (Gossman p. 196).

⁵⁶¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The historian and popular culture', in Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand, Edward T. Gargan, *Popular Culture in France: The Wolf and the Lamb: From the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century*, (Saratoga, Calif: Anma Libri, 1977), p. 9.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

no real interest to the reading public at the time, however, for some of the period's best-selling writers produced historical novels centrally focused on the subject. And while such works fall somewhat outside the chronological and conceptual scope of this study, it is necessary still to say a few words about some of the most important examples, perhaps to indicate where such research might next lead.

Among these novels, Alexandre Dumas *père* and Eugène Sue made some of the most significant contributions. Dumas alone published no fewer than six historical novels, from 1845-55 which were set during, or around the time of the Revolution. His *Mémoires d'un médecin* alone comprises four revolutionary fictions (five if one includes *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge*); in this cycle of novels, a popular literary chronicle of the epoch, Dumas advances a view of the people which Gisèle Séginger describes as “doté d'une force palingénésique. Inconscient et puissant comme l'eau ou le feu, il entraîne le monde dans un chaos purificateur et recréateur.”⁵⁶³ If this characterization recalls familiar themes, it is because Dumas' representation of the Revolution is deeply indebted to that of his esteemed contemporary, “notre grand maître Michelet.”⁵⁶⁴ This influence is explicitly acknowledged in *La Comtesse de Charny*, the fourth installment of the *Mémoires*, where Dumas remarks in a footnote: “si j'étais obligé de citer notre grand historien chaque fois que je lui emprunte quelque chose, nos lecteurs trouveraient son nom au bas de chacune de nos pages.”⁵⁶⁵

In addition to the *Mémoires d'un médecin*, Dumas published another revolutionary novel during this period, *Ingénue* (1853), a work that engages more directly and singularly with the historical moment. Centered on Rétif de la Bretonne and his young daughter—the titular *Ingénue*—Dumas reimagines revolutionary Paris and populates it with consequential historical figures: Marat, Corday, Danton, and of course Rétif, to name only a few.⁵⁶⁶ These

⁵⁶³ Gisèle Séginger, ‘D’une révolution à l’autre: 1848-1870’, in Aude Déruelle and Jean-Marie Roulin, eds., *Les Romans de la Révolution: 1790-1912*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), p. 105.

⁵⁶⁴ Alexandre Dumas, *La Comtesse de Charny*, 4 vols. (Brussels: Complexe, 1989), 3, p. 392.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 472.

⁵⁶⁶ Alexandre Dumas, *Ingénue: un amour interdit de Restif de la Bretonne*, (Paris: François Bourin, 1990).

historical actors feature prominently, yet they are often subsumed into the novel's personal drama, assimilated into an expansive historical tableau animated by the chaotic spontaneity of the moment itself. In certain respects, *Ingénue* may be considered the French historical novel *par excellence*—the most faithful Gallic heir to the Scottian tradition—for the way it weaves the nation's most consequential moment into the fabric of the historical romance. As Paule Petitier observes, Dumas's narrative is not merely a melodramatic embellishment of history, but a formal attempt to capture the volatile convergence of forces that define the revolutionary conjuncture: "Dumas s'efforce dans *Ingénue* de formuler ce qu'en termes abstraits on appellerait une 'conjuncture'; l'intrigue Romanesque, y compris dans ses aspects mélodramatiques, vient renforcer la vision de ce moment historique comme conjonction d'éléments que l'événement viendra concrétiser et révéler."⁵⁶⁷ In this sense, Dumas approaches the Revolution not simply through mythic distillation, but with a structure which seeks, in many ways like the epistolary novel before it, to exploit the unstable convergence of personal and historical tensions—ultimately producing a narrative that both constructs and complicates the representation of historical myth. Yet he also invents; for although he acknowledges the debt his work owes to France's grand historians, Michelet perhaps above all others, Dumas often writes with less concern for the "local color" which had made the Scottian historical romance so unique and compelling. As one of his biographers has observed, history "was used by Dumas in much the same way as science was used by Zola: to confer a semblance of veracity on his fiction."⁵⁶⁸ A testament to his reliance, at times, on an almost improvisational creative spark, we are told that while writing *Le Collier de la Reine* Dumas "did not even bother to visit Versailles, but invented the setting."⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁷ Paule Petitier, 'l'expérience du temps', in Aude Déruelle and Jean-Marie Roulin, eds., *Les Romans de la Révolution: 1790-1912*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), p. 372.

⁵⁶⁸ F.W.J. Hemmings, *Alexandre Dumas*, (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2012), p. 187.

⁵⁶⁹ Michael Ross, *Alexandre Dumas*, (London: David & Charles, 1981), p. 214. According to Ross, Dumas also wrote *Ange Pitou*, the revolutionary novel set in 1793, entirely from his own imagination. When the work's collaborator, Auguste Maquet, had taken all the relevant documents, Dumas was left with little more than his own thoughts and experiences.

Whether his novels were invented seemingly out of thin air, or with the collaboration of others, as “industrial” productions, Dumas’ works were among the most popular of the time.

Perhaps Dumas’ most formidable competitor in the economy of mid-nineteenth-century popular literature, Eugène Sue has been dubbed, with good reason, “Le roi du roman Populaire.”⁵⁷⁰ Among the notable differences between Sue and Dumas (and Michelet, for that matter) is the more explicit embrace of class consciousness in his writing, which results in a rather different conception of popular literature and, consequently, of the people. In his sociological study of *Les mystères de Paris*, Christopher Prendergast describes Sue’s conception of the people as largely in line with burgeoning ideological trends of the 1840s, specifically those of 1848; “peuple” and “Populaire”, as Prendergast explains, became around this time “more specialized terms of social description and self-description more closely associated with ‘les couches populaires’, especially the semi-industrialized urban working class.”⁵⁷¹ But how is this reflected in Sue’s novels? Again we turn to Prendergast’s enlightening study, which anoints *Les Mystères de Paris* the “great popular novel of the period”, in principle because “it was written not only for the ‘people’ about the ‘people’ but also by the ‘people’.”⁵⁷² What is meant by this statement is that Sue was acutely cognizant of the conditions under which his readers lived, through observation and direct correspondence. Thus, his novels often relayed to the reader what they already knew; in this regard Sue’s work differs from Michelet’s in particular, for he does not proselytize or theorize so much as he holds up a mirror for the reader to observe his own reflection.

If *Les Mystères de Paris* concentrates on the state of French society at its present moment, in the 1840s, it is in another of Sue’s works, the similarly-titled *Les Mystères du peuple*, where the author greatly expands the scope of his sociological literary project,

⁵⁷⁰ See: Jean-Louis Bory, *Eugène Sue: Le roi du roman Populaire*, (Paris: Hachette, 1962).

⁵⁷¹ Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People? Eugène Sue’s ‘Les Mystères de Paris’: A Hypothesis in the Sociology of Literature*, (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 5.

⁵⁷² *Ibid*, p. 14.

branching into the realm of history. At once an immense historical fresco and the chronicle of a single family—“l’histoire d’une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges”—the work is a collection of nineteen historical novels, which follows a single “dynasty” across the centuries. In terms of its substance, *Les Mystères du peuple* is a composite novel which, as Jean-Louis Bory explains, draws from a vast array of generic and methodological approaches, mixing “l’épopée, le cours de l’histoire, le lyrisme déclamatoire, le mélodrame, le catéchisme socialiste et la pédagogie.”⁵⁷³ A literary project comparable in scope to Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, it is unsurprising to find, as Matthieu Letourneux highlights, the historian’s influence throughout Sue’s work. This is evident in general terms, where across *Les Mystères* Michelet’s “vision lyrique du peuple sert d’intertexte constant à son [Sue’s] récit” and is particularly salient in Sue’s volume on the Revolution, *Le Sabre d’honneur*.⁵⁷⁴

Grand in its engagement with the historical moment, yet intimate as a literary fiction, Sue does not merely conflate thematic approaches to the subject, but generic ones as well. At times the novel reads more like a narrative history of the Revolution, recounting those critical events with no less attention to detail than Sue’s historian contemporaries, Michelet or Louis Blanc, while at others it takes on the appearance of a theatrical drama or *roman intime*, exploring the human condition in miniature as events transpire. Its most important component, however, is as a pedagogical fiction, which communicates to the people a clear account of their past, “comme œuvre d’enseignement historique pour nos frères du peuple, laissés jusqu’ici dans une profonde ignorance de leur véritable histoire.”⁵⁷⁵ *Le Sabre d’honneur*, as we see, is first a work for and about “the people”, as recounted by one of them, Jean Lebrenn. But Lebrenn is not simply the story’s hero and its progenitor, he is also the novel’s author. Much like those epistolary novelists some decades earlier had

⁵⁷³ Jean-Louis Bory, *Eugène Sue: Le roi du roman Populaire*, (Paris: Hachette, 1962), p. 334.

⁵⁷⁴ Matthieu Letourneux, ‘Préface’, in Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères du peuple, ou l’histoire d’une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003), p. XXXI.

⁵⁷⁵ Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères du peuple, ou l’histoire d’une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges*, 2 vols, (Paris: Librairie du progrès, c. 1885), 2, p. 635.

employed *crypto-auctorial* motifs to give the illusion of verisimilitude, Sue similarly defers authorship to Lebrenn. For Sue, however, there is no illusion; his intent is not merely to give a realistic sense to the work, rather it is to facilitate the reader's self-identification within the historical struggle—so that he might remember, then inherit the same revolutionary spirit as his ancestors; *Les Mystères* was written for the people because it was written, in almost metaphysical terms, by them. In this sense the novel's political imperative is timeless and mythological: "Rien ne serait... plus opportun que cette publication en ce temps-ci; oui, ces récits, publiés sous le titre des *Mystères du Peuple*, auraient une puissante influence sur l'esprit des masses."⁵⁷⁶ Whether the reader actually believed in the veracity of this construct is irrelevant, so long as the narrative reflected experiential and sentimental truths with which the people could identify and sympathize. To this end Sue was what Prendergast describes as "a kind of divinely appointed emissary from the ranks of the bourgeois writer, sent to speak 'for' those otherwise deprived of voice or audience."⁵⁷⁷ The author acts, in other words, as a conduit for the transmission of historical-political experience from forebear to progeny, between generations and across centuries.

Because considerable portions of the novel are presented through diegesis, as extracts from the journal which Lebrenn kept during the Revolution, the narration of specific events (and the "author's" reactions to them) tends to read as a *mélange* of historical narrative and intimate reflection, thus merging, as we see in the following, from his account of the September massacres, Lebrenn's personal memory with wider historical context:

J'étais plongé dans la stupeur. Je ne pouvais plus en douter, l'*opinion publique* se prononçait pour l'extermination en masse des prisonniers royalistes. Les sections députaient leurs délégués à la Commune pour lui notifier l'urgence de PURGER les prisons. La Commune, par l'organe de Tallien, approuvait le massacre; enfin,

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁷ Prendergast, *For the People by the People?*, pp. 50-51.

Danton l'approuvait aussi, Danton ministre de la *justice* élu par l'Assemblée!
Comment lutter contre de pareilles convictions? Je l'essayai pourtant, n'ignorant pas, d'ailleurs que je risquais ma vie; car, en ces moments d'effervescence populaire et d'entraînement, se prononcer contre le vœu général, c'est s'exposer à passer pour un traître. Je m'élançai sur un banc qui se trouvait près de moi, et je m'écriai d'une voix où palpitaient toutes les encoffures [sic] de mon âme: Citoyens, au nom de la patrie, au nom de la Révolution, écoutez-moi!⁵⁷⁸

The shift from private shock to public intervention dramatizes and personalizes the historical scene, conflating the internal (personal) response with collective (historical) action, and thus forcing a confrontation of the public and personal. Michelet achieves a similar effect in the *Histoire* by occasionally referencing the personal accounts or memoirs of “regular” people (i.e. not important historical figures), but where Sue the novelist is somewhat freer, like we see in the passage above, to reimagine and invent the emotional responses of his characters, Michelet is bound by the historian’s constraints. And while he does indeed take some liberties, he cannot (or ought not) simply invent experiences; Michelet’s engagement with the personal is often refracted through the conventions of archival history or invoked rhetorically, rather than dramatically. Sue, by contrast, infuses a similar narrative-historical foundation with individual experience and ideological suggestion; the people must not only remember but relive the Revolution through a figure who is both witness and actor, chronicler and political lodestar. What results is a form of literary memory uniquely situated between testimonial and historical myth.

The representational asymmetries between these two approaches—the popular novel and formal history—are emblematic of one of the main creative frictions I have been concerned with exploring throughout this thesis. My study has endeavored to resolve some

⁵⁷⁸ Sue, *Les Mystères du peuple*, 2, pp. 667-668.

of these tensions first by looking beyond superficial generic conventions (sometimes by first acknowledging them), to glimpse the Revolution's memory as a thing in itself, or at least as a motif which traverses diverse literary forms, reappearing throughout the nineteenth century to say something about how this event has been absorbed into the broader literary culture. I have concluded with this brief foray into the popular novel to ask, in some sense, whether Dumas and Sue are the true prophets of the revolutionary mythos, with the *roman-feuilleton* serving as their written gospel of postrevolutionary France. Alternatively, it is prudent to ask whether their professed intellectual debts to Michelet indicate that *he* is indeed the Revolution's true mythographer, and their works are essentially popularized versions of his historical myth.

More generally, we are left to consider what it meant to represent the Revolution for a mass readership, a half century after the fact. Where the epistolary novel had once stood as the eminent genre of popular consumption—becoming, during and immediately after the Revolution a critical repository for the expression and transmission of its early memory—the *roman-feuilleton* then arrogated a similar cultural niche, while greatly expanding the optic of revolutionary experience from a few correspondents to the whole of French society. Writers like Dumas and Sue exist at a crossroads in nineteenth-century literature; are they among the last of the likes of those writers I have discussed throughout this thesis, or the *avant-garde* of new literary vogues? Perhaps a more sustained engagement with their revolutionary fictions—many of which have been given little scholarly attention, have fallen into obscurity, or were only recently “rediscovered”—will help us to better understand where they stand in French literary history, and how the Revolution itself was written, and indeed read, during this time.

Ultimately, as I hope to have shown, the Revolution's afterlife cannot be contained by any single form, nor fully claimed by history or literary fiction alone. Its memory during this period circulated through genres and according to ideological perspectives that were themselves tenuous. Whether epistolary or popular, romantic or nationalistic, each work

refracts a different facet of the same historical event. What this study has sought to demonstrate is not simply that the Revolution was remembered at all, but how its memory was made and remade in the act of literary representation. Whether through the fragmented intimacy of epistolarity, the subjective disillusion of the *mal du siècle*, or the universalizing scope of Balzacian realism, the Revolution endured as a narrative problem—and a cultural mainstay. To write the Revolution, or simply to invoke it, was not only to commemorate or explain it, but to imagine or reinvent a usable past, one capable of responding to the traumas and aspirations of postrevolutionary France.

Appendices

Appendix I: Images



Figure 1: Attributed to Fougeat, 'Funérailles de Marat, à l'église des Cordeliers, les 15 et 16 juillet 1793', oil on canvas (1793) (© Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris)



Figure 2: Jacques-Louis David, 'Les funérailles de Patrocle', oil on canvas (1778) (© National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin)



Fig. 3: Jean Joseph François Tassaert, after: Jean-Jacques Hauer, 'Portrait de Charlotte Corday', stipple on paper (1793) (© The British Museum)



Figure 4: Pierre-Michel Alix, after: Jean-François Garneray, 'Marie Anne Charlotte Corday, 1793', stipple engraving with hand-coloring (1793) (© UCL Art Museum)



Figure 5: Jean-Jacques Hauer, 'Marie-Anne-Charlotte de Corday, dite Charlotte Corday', oil on canvas (1793)(© Musée National du Château de Versailles et des Trianons)



Figure 6: Jean-Jacques Hauer, 'La mort de Marat, le 13 juillet 1793', oil on canvas (1794)
(© Musée Lambinet)



Figure 7: Jacques-Louis David, 'La mort du jeune Bara', oil on canvas (1794) (© Musée Calvet, Avignon)

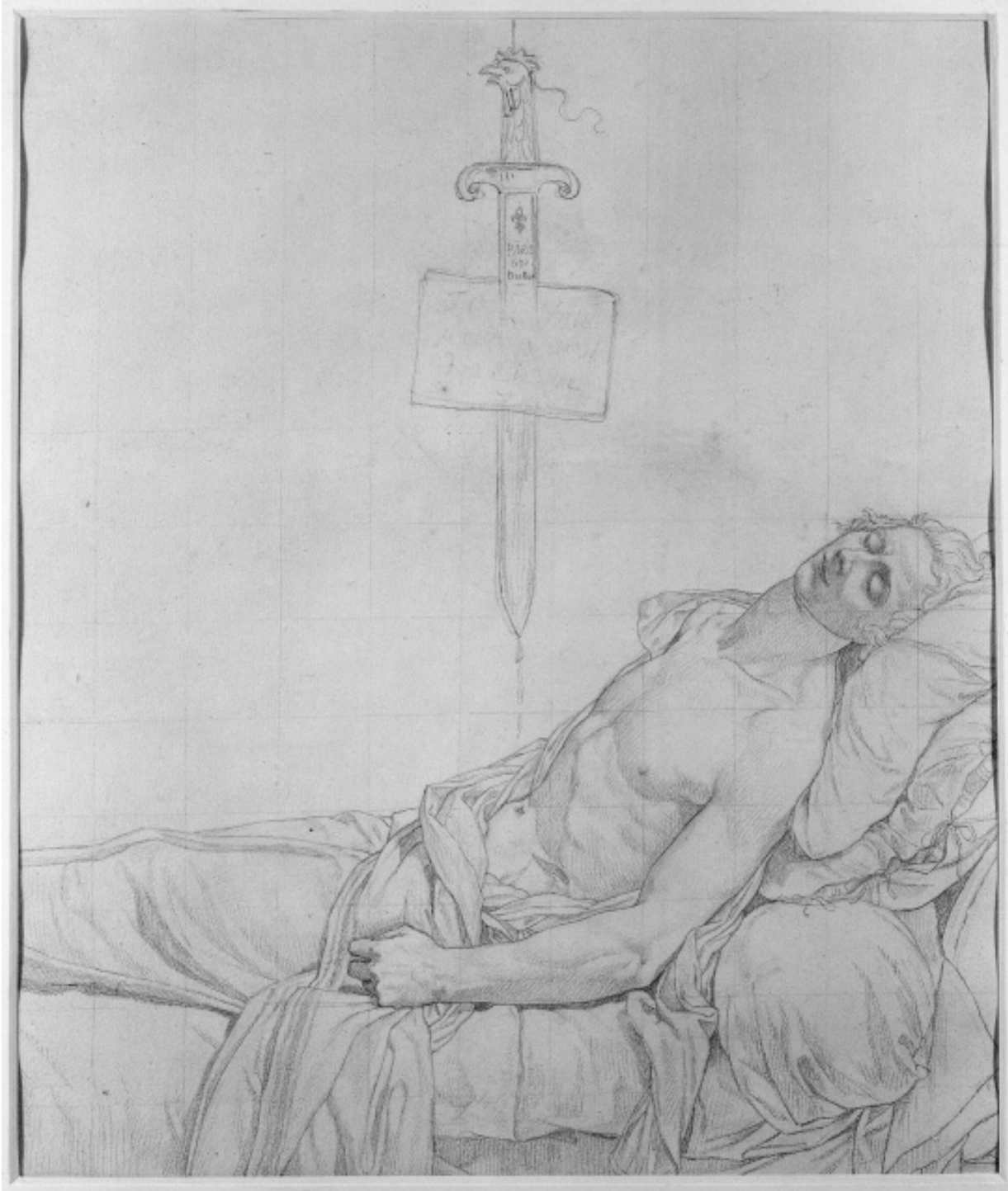


Fig. 8 Pierre Alexandre Tardieu after Jacques-Louis David, 'Les derniers moments de Michel Lepeletier', engraving (1793)



Figure 9: Jacques-Louis David, 'Marat assassiné', oil on canvas (1793) (© Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique, Bruxelles)



Figure 10: Detail of Corday's knife, with white hilt.



Figure 11: Marat's desk, inscribed with David's dedication; Marat's name directly below Corday's.



Figure 12: Detail of Corday's letter in Marat's hand.



Figure 13: Death mask of Jean-Paul Marat.

Bibliography

Correspondences, memoirs, journals, and newspaper articles

Chateaubriand, François-René de. *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. 4 vols. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1995

Custine, Astolphe de. *La Russie en 1839*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018

Desmoulins, Camille. *Le vieux cordelier*. Paris: Belin, 2010

Hébert, Jacques-René. *Le Père Duchesne*, No. 260 (1793)

Le Tellier. (Pseudonym), *Le Triomphe des Parisiens*. Paris: Chez Cressionnier, 1789

Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution Française, par Sanson, exécuteur des arrêts criminels, pendant la Révolution. 2 vols. Paris: Chez les Marchands de Nouveautés, 1831

Richardson, Samuel. *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*. ed. by John Carroll. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964

Sade, Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de, *Discours prononcé à la Fête décernée par la Section des Piques, aux mânes de Marat et de Le Pelletier, par Sade, citoyen de cette section, et membre de la Société populaire*, (1793)

Sanson, Henri. *Sept générations d'exécuteurs, 1688-1847: mémoires des Sanson*. 6 vols. Paris: Dupray de la Mahérie, 1863

Other primary published sources

Ballanche, Pierre-Simon. *Œuvres de Ballanche*. 6 vols. Paris: Bureau de l'Encyclopédie des connaissances utiles, 1833

- Balzac, Honoré de. *La Comédie humaine*, 12 vols. ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex. Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1981
- Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules. *L'Enfermée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977
- Baudelaire, Charles. *La Passion des images: Œuvres choisies*. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2021
- Charrière, Isabelle de. *Lettres Neuchâtelaises*. Paris: La Différence, 1991
- . *Trois femmes*. Gollion: Infolio, 2017
- . *Une aristocrate révolutionnaire, Écrits 1788-1794*. ed. by Isabelle Vissière. Paris: Des Femmes, 1988
- Chateaubriand, François-René de. *Essai sur les révolutions; Génie du christianisme*. ed. Maurice Regard. Paris: Gallimard, 1978
- . *Les Natchez, Atala-René*. Ed. Jean-Claude Berchet. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989
- . *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*. ed. Maurice Levaillant and Georges Lubin, 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1969
- . *Voyage en Amérique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2019
- Chénier, André. *Œuvres Complètes d'André Chénier*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940
- Colet, Louise. *Chants des vaincus: poésies nouvelles*. Paris: A. René et Compagnie, 1846
- Custine, Astolphe de. *Aloys*. Paris: Librairie Fontaine, 1983
- Dumas, Alexandre. *Ingénue: un amour interdit de Restif de la Bretonne*. Paris: François Bourin, 1990
- . *La Comtesse de Charny*. 4 vols. Brussels: Complexe, 1989
- Duras, Claire de. *Ourika*, in, *Ourika. Édouard. Olivier ou le secret*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007
- Esquiros, Alphonse. *Charlotte Corday*. 2 vols. Paris: Desessart, 1840

- Genlis, Stéphanie Félicité (Madame) de. *Les Petits émigrés ou correspondance de quelques enfans*. London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821
- Hugo, Victor. *Odes et ballades*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964
- Lamartine, Alphonse de. *Histoire des Girondins*. 2 vols. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2014
- Maistre, Joseph de. *Œuvres complètes*, 14 vols. Lyon: Librairie Générale Catholique et Classique, 1891
- . *Œuvres*. Ed. by Pierre Glaudes. Paris: Bouquins, 2007
- Meilhan, Gabriel Sénac de. *L'Émigré*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004
- . *Des Principes et des Causes de la Révolution en France*. London, 1790
- Mercier, Louis-Sébastien, and Restif de La Bretonne. *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit...* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006
- Michelet, Jules. *Histoire de France: La Gaule, Les Invasions, Charlemagne*. Paris: Équateurs, 2008
- . *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1952
- . *Histoire Romaine*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003
- . *Le Peuple*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974
- . *Philosophie de l'histoire*. Paris: Flammarion, 2016
- Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*. ed. by Roger Caillois, 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949–1951
- Musset, Alfred de. *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003
- Nodier, Charles. *Jean Sbogar*. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1987
- . *Le Vingt-un Janvier ou une heure de Louis-Seize dans la tour du Temple*. Paris: J.G. Dentu, 1822

- . *Les proscrits*. Paris: Lepetit et Gérard, 1802
- . *Œuvres complètes*, 13 vols. Paris: Librairie D'Eugène Renduel, 1832-1841
- . *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l'Empire*. 2 vols. Paris: Charpentier, 1860
- . *Thérèse Aubert*. Paris: Ladvocat, 1819
- Rétif de la Bretonne, Nicolas-Edme. *Les Nuits révolutionnaires*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1978
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Paris: Flammarion, 2018
- Sade, Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de. *Aline et Valcour*. Paris: Classiques de Poche, 1994
- Saint-Just, Louis-Antoine de. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004
- Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin. *Nouveaux lundis*, 13 vols. Paris: Calmann Levy, 1883-1886
- . *Portraits Contemporains*, 3 vols. Paris: Didier, 1846
- . *Portraits de femmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998
- Salm, Constance de. *Œuvres Complètes*. 2 vols. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1842
- Senancour, Étienne Pivert de. *Aldoman, ou le bonheur dans l'obscurité*. Paris: Les Presses françaises, 1925
- . *Oberman*. Paris: Flammarion, 2003
- Souza, Adélaïde (Madame) de. *Adèle de Sénange*. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2018
- Staël, Germaine de. *Œuvres Complètes*. 17 vols. Paris: Treuttel & Würtz, 1820
- . *Œuvres*. Ed. by Catriona Seth. Paris: Gallimard, 2017
- Stendhal. *Œuvres intimes*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1982
- Sue, Eugène. *Les Mystères du peuple, ou l'histoire d'une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges*. ed. by Matthieu Letourneux. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003

———. *Les Mystères du peuple, ou l'histoire d'une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges*, 2 vols. Paris: Librairie du progrès, c. 1885

Vico, Giambattista. *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*. 'trans. by David Marsh'. London: Penguin, 1999

Secondary material

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016

Astbury, Katherine. 'The trans-national dimensions of the émigré novel during the French Revolution'. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23 (2011), pp. 215-232

———. *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*. London & New York: Routledge, 2012

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. trans. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019

———. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021

Baldensperger, Fernand. *Le Mouvement des idées dans l'émigration française (1789-1815)*. 3 vols. Paris: Plon, 1924

Bann, Stephen. *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the representation of history in nineteenth-century Britain and France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986

- . *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990
- Barb ris, Pierre. *Balzac et le mal du si cle*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1970
- . *Balzac: une mythologie r aliste*. Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971
- . *Chateaubriand: Une r action au monde modern*. Paris: Larousse, 1976
- . *Le Monde de Balzac*. Paris: Kime, 1999
- Bard che, Maurice. *Une Lecture de Balzac*. Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1964
- Barthes, Roland. *Essais critiques IV: Le Bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984
- . *Michelet*. Paris:  ditions du Seuil, 2002
- Beauroy, Jacques, Marc Bertrand, Edward T. Gargan. *Popular Culture in France: The Wolf and the Lamb: From the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century*. Saratoga, Calif: Anma Libri, 1977
- Beebee, Thomas O. *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999
- B guin, Albert. *Balzac visionnaire*. Geneva: Albert Skira, 1946
- B nichou, Paul. *Romantismes francais*. 3 vols. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2004
- Bercegol, Fabienne, Pierre Glaudes, Jean-Marie Roulin, eds. *Chateaubriand, nouvelles perspectives critiques*. Paris: Garnier, 2020
- Berchet, Jean-Claude. *Chateaubriand*. Paris: Gallimard, 2012
- . *Chateaubriand, ou les al as du d sir*. Paris: Belin, 2012
- Berenson, Edward. *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1852*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*. London: Pimlico, 1997

- . *Freedom and its Betrayal*. ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014
- Berthier, Patrick. 'Balzac et Robespierre', in *L'Année Balzacienne*. Vendôme, Presses Universitaires de France: (1990), p. 29-50
- Bory, Jean-Louis. *Eugène Sue: Le roi du roman Populaire*. Paris: Hachette, 1962
- Brombert, Victor. *La Prison Romantique*. Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1975
- Brookner, Anita. *Jacques-Louis David*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1980
- Brunetière, Ferdinand. *Histoire de la littérature française*. 4 vols. Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1919
- Butler, Ronnie. *Balzac and the French Revolution*. Kent: Croom Helm, 1983
- Caraion, Marta. *Comment la littérature pense les objets*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020
- Carpenter, Kristy and Philip Mansel (eds.), *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution*. London: Macmillan, 1999
- Caruth, Cathy (ed.). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996
- Castex, Pierre-Georges. 'L'Ascension de M. Grandet', in *Blzac Colloque*. Paris: Europe, 1965
- Charpentier, Paul. *Une maladie morale: le mal du siècle*. Paris: Didier, 1880
- Clément, Jean-Paul. *Chateaubriand politique*. Paris: Hachette, 1987
- Compagnon, Antoine. *Les Antimodernes*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016
- Cornford, Francis M. *Thucydides Mythistoricus*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971
- Counter, Andrew J. *The Amorous Restoration: Love, Sex, and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016

- Courteix, René-Alexandre. *Balzac et la Révolution française*, Paris: PUF, 1997
- Courtney, C.P. *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen): A Biography*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1993
- Crow, Thomas. *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995
- Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Perseus, 2009
- . *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748-1789*. London: Allen Lane, 2023
- De Bertier de Sauvigny, Guillaume. *La Restauration*. Paris: Flammarion, 1955
- Decot, Jeremy, Clare Siviter. *Un Engagement en vers et contre tous: servir les révolutions, rejouer leurs mémoires (1789-1848)*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2021
- Degout, Bernard. *Je ne suis plus que le temps: essai sur Chateaubriand*. Paris: Fayard, 2015
- Delécluze, Étienne-Jean. *Louis David: Son école et son temps (1855)*. Paris: Macula, 1983
- Deluermoz, Quentin and Anthony Glinoyer. *L'Insurrection entre histoire et littérature (1789-1014)*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015
- Déruelle, Aude and Jean-Marie Roulin, eds. *Les Romans de la Révolution: 1790-1912*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2014
- Didier, Béatrice. *Écrire la Révolution, 1789-1799*. Paris: PUF, 1989
- . *L'Écriture femme*. Paris: PUF, 1991
- . *Les Grandes dates de la littérature française*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994
- . *La littérature de la Révolution française*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988

- Dowd, David Lloyd. 'Art as national propaganda in the French Revolution', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15 (1951), pp. 532-546
- . *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1948
- Edelstein, Dan. *The Terror of Natural Right*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009
- Escoube, Pierre. *Sénac de Meilhan: de la France de Louis XV à l'Europe des émigrés*. Paris: Perrin, 1984
- Fairweather, Maria. *Madame de Staël*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005
- Farrant, Tim. *Balzac's Shorter Fictions: Genesis and Genre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002
- Fontana, Biancamaria. *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016
- Freud, Sigmund. *Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. A.A. Brill (trans.). New York: The Modern Library, 1995
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020
- Fumaroli, Marc. *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003
- Furet, François. *Penser la Révolution française*. Paris: Gallimard, 1978
- Garrard, Graeme. 'Rousseau, Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment'. *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): pp. 97-120
- Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987
- Gengembre, Gérard. *Réalisme et naturalisme*. Paris: Seuil, 1997
- Gérard, Alice. *La Révolution française, mythes et interprétations 1789-1970*. Paris: Flammarion, 1970
- Godechot, Jacques. *La Contre-révolution: 1789-1804*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984

- Goodman, Dena. *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996
- Goodman, Jessica. *Commemorating Mirabeau: 'Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées' and Other Texts*. Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017
- Gossman, Lionel. *Between History and Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990
- Guicheteau, Samuel. *David : la fabrique du génie*. Paris: Ellipses, 2018
- Guilhaumou, Jacques. *La Mort de Marat*. Brussels: Complexe, 1989
- Gutwirth, Madelyn. *Madame de Staël, Novelist*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1978
- . *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992
- Hadjinicolaou, Nicos, Louise Asmal (trans.). *Art History and Class Struggle*. London: Pluto Press, 1978
- Hannoosh, Michèle. *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019
- Haskell, Francis. *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993
- Heathcote, Owen. *Balzac and Violence: Representing History, Space, Sexuality and Death in La Comédie Humaine*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009
- Heffernan, James A. W. *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1992
- Hemmings, F.W.J. *Alexandre Dumas*. London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2012

- Hoog, Armand, and Beth Brombert. 'Who Invented the Mal du Siècle?'. *Yale French Studies*, 13 (1954), pp. 42–51
- Hunt, Lynn. 'The world we have gained: the future of the French Revolution'. *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003). pp. 1-19
- . *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986
- Jensen, Mark K. 'The Relation of History to Literature in Vigny's Thought before the Preface to *Cinq-Mars*'. *French Forum*, 18.2 (1993). pp. 165-183
- Jenson, Deborah. *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001
- Jordan, David. *The King's trial: Louis XVI vs. the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979
- Lyon-Caen, Judith. *La griffe du temps*. Paris: Gallimard, 2019
- Karmarkar, Medha Nirody. *Madame de Charrière et la révolution des idées*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996
- Kupiec, Anne. *Charles Nodier, le politique masqué*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2018
- Lachènée, A. Decauville. *Catalogue des Tableaux, Gravures, Objets d'Art Exposés dans la Salle de la Collection Mancel*. Caen: Charles Valin, 1897
- Lajer-Burcharth, Ewa. *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999
- Le Goff, Jacques. *Histoire et Mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977

- Leith, James A. *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France, 1750-1799*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965
- Lerner, Bettina R. 'Michelet, mythologue'. *Yale French Studies*, 111 (2007), pp. 61-72
- Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981
- Lukacs, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983
- Maley, Catherine A. 'Historically Speaking, Tu or Vous?'. *The French Review*, 45 (1972). pp. 999-1006
- Mali, Joseph. *Legacy of Vico in Modern Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012
- . *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003
- Mansel, Philip. *Paris Between Empires 1814-1852: Monarchy and Revolution*. London: Phoenix, 2001
- Manzini, Francesco. *Stendhal's Parallel Lives*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007
- Marceau, Félicien. *Balzac et Son Monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008
- Martin, Jean-Clément. *Les Échos de la Terreur*. Paris: Belin, 2018
- . *L'exécution du roi: 21 janvier 1793*. Paris: Perrin, 2021
- . *La Révolte brisée: Femmes dans la Révolution française et l'Empire*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2008
- . *La Terreur, vérités et légendes*. Paris: Perrin, 2017
- . *Violence et Révolution: essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006

- Maza, Sarah. *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003
- Mazeau, Guillaume. *Corday contre Marat: Deux siècles d'images*. Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2009
- . *Le bain de l'histoire: Charlotte Corday et l'attentat contre Marat 1793-2009*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2009
- McCalla, Arthur. 'Palingénésie philosophique to palingénésie sociale: from a scientific ideology to a historical ideology'. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55 (1994). pp. 421-39
- . *A Romantic Historiosophy: The Philosophy of History of Pierre-Simon Ballanche*. Boston: Brill, 1998
- McGuinness, Patrick. *Poetry & Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France: From Anarchism to 'Action française'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015
- Michel, Pierre. *Un Mythe Romantique: Les Barbares 1789-1848*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1981
- Miller, Mary Ashburn. 'A Fiction of the French Nation', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 44.2 (2018), 45–66
- Monod, Gabriel. *Renan, Taine, Michelet: les maîtres de l'histoire*. Hamburg: Tredition, 1894
- Moon, Iris, and Richard Taws, eds. *Time, Media, and Visuality in Post-Revolutionary France*. New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021
- . *Luxury After the Terror*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2022
- Moretti, Franco. *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*. Verso: New York, 2014

- Morisi, Ève. *Capital Letters: Hugo, Baudelaire, Camus, and the Death Penalty*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020
- Nora, Pierre, ed. *Les Lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1997
- Orr, Linda. 'French romantic histories of the Revolution: Michelet, Blanc, Tocqueville—a narrative'. *The Eighteenth Century* 30.2 (1989), pp. 123-142
- . *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990
- Ozouf, Mona. 'Ballanche: "L'Idée et l'image du régicide"'. *Le Débat* 39 (1986), pp. 67-80
- Painter, George D. *Chateaubriand, A Biography: The Longed-for Tempests*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1977
- Pasco, Allan. *Balzacian Montage: Configuring 'La Comédie Humaine'*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991
- Pavel, Thomas. *Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986
- Petitier, Paule (ed.). *Michelet, Rythme de la prose, rythme de l'histoire*. Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2010
- . *Jules Michelet: L'homme histoire*. Paris: Grasset, 2006
- Petrey, Sandy. *Realism and Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989
- Plessix Gray, Francine Du. *Rage and Fire: A Life of Louis Colet: Pioneer Feminist, Literary Star, Flaubert's Muse*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994
- Prendergast, Christopher. *Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978
- . *For the People by the People? Eugène Sue's 'Les Mystères de Paris': A Hypothesis in the Sociology of Literature*. Oxford: Legenda, 2003
- . *The Fourteenth of July and the Taking of the Bastille*. London: Profile Books, 2008

- . *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988
- Pressly, William L. *The French Revolution as Blasphemy: Johan Zoffany's Paintings of the Massacre at Paris, August 10, 1792*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999
- Quérière, Yves de la. "René" et "Oberman": Dialectique du mal du siècle'. *Romance Notes*, 14.1. (1972), pp. 75-82
- Reardon, Michael. 'Pierre Ballanche as French Traditionalist'. *Catholic Historical Review*, 53 (1968). pp. 573-599
- Rice-DeFosse, Mary. 'Nodier's Post-Revolutionary Poetics of Terror: "Thérèse Aubert"'. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 24 (1996), pp. 287-295
- Rigney, Ann. *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002
- . *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001
- Robert, Yann. *Dramatic Justice: Trial by theater in the age of the French Revolution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019
- Ross, Michael. *Alexandre Dumas*. London: David & Charles, 1981
- Roulin, Jean-Marie, and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin, eds. *Fictions de la Révolution: 1789-1912*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018
- Samuels, Maurice. *The Spectacular Past: Popular history and the novel in nineteenth-century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004

- Segal, Naomi. *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988
- Seth, Catriona. *André Chénier: Le Miracle du siècle, mémoire de la critique*. Paris: PUPS, 2005
- . *Les Rois aussi en mouraient: Les Lumières en lutte contre la petite vérole*. Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2008
- Singer, Godfrey Frank. *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963
- Smith, Maxwell. 'Alfred de Vigny, founder of the French historical novel'. *The French Review*. 13.1 (1939). pp. 5-13
- Stammers, Tom. *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c. 1790-1890*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020
- Starobinski, Jean. *1789: Les emblems de la raison*. Paris: Flammarion, 1979
- Thibaudet, Albert. *Histoire de la littérature française*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2022
- Trousseau, Raymond. *Isabelle de Charrière*. Paris: Hachette, 1994
- Vanoncini, Andre. 'Balzac en deçà et au-delà des lois de l'histoire', *L'Année Balzacienne* 15 (2014), pp. 87-101
- Vatel, Charles. *Charlotte Corday et les Girondins*. 3 vols. Paris: Henri Plon, 1864-1872
- Versini, Laurent. *Le Roman Épistolaire*. Paris: PUF, 1998
- Veyne, Paul. *Comment on écrit l'histoire*. Paris: Points, 2015
- Viallaneix, Paul. 'Jules Michelet, évangéliste de La Révolution française', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 66.1 (1988), pp. 43-51
- . 'Michelet et la révélation de 1789', *Romantisme*, 50 (1985), pp. 61-74

- Vinet, Alexandre. *Chateaubriand*. Montreux: Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1990
- Waller, Margaret. *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993
- Walzer, Michael. *Regicide and Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974
- Weston, Helen, William Vaughan (eds.) *David's Death of Marat*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000
- White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985
- Wurmser, André. *La comédie inhumaine*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970
- Wynn, Thomas (ed.). *Representing Violence in France, 1760-1820*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013
- Zanone, Damien. *Écrire son temps: les mémoires en France de 1815 à 1848*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2006
- Zielonka, Anthony. *Alphonse Esquiros (1812-1876): A Study of His Works*. Paris: Champion, 1985
- Zweig, Stefan. *Adam Lux: dix tableaux de la vie d'un révolutionnaire allemand*. trans. By Olivier Mannoni. Paris: Payot, 2021