Michelet was rehabilitated several decades ago, after years of mingled positivist and Catholic disapproval, by the founders of the Annales school. What Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and more recently Fernand Braudel admired him for was the original perception of history that led him to alter the historian’s visible landscape, to seek out “les silences de l’histoire,” all the past that lies beyond the usual written sources and that now seems more fundamental than the “evenemential” history of battles and council chambers. As readers of Michelet the historians were not primarily concerned with Michelet’s text itself. Michelet’s interest in diet or population, for example, signified to them a heightened awareness of the scope of historical study, a richer conception of historical reality. They did not need to consider the system of poetic relations into which diet and population are woven in Michelet’s text, and through which

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1 Even Michelet’s pupil, Gabriel Monod, criticized the master for being too imaginative. See La Vie et la pensée de Jules Michelet (Paris, 1923), 2 vols. See also the reservations of Georges Lefebvre, La Naissance de l’historiographie moderne (Paris, 1971), 204.

2 Michelet, according to Febvre “a tout pressenti et deviné” (Lucien Febvre, La Terre et l’évolution humaine [Paris, 1922], 64; see also his Michelet [Geneva, 1946]; and the article on Michelet in Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences [1933]).
alone it exists as a text rather than an assortment of judgments, ideas and pieces of information. It is with Michelet's text that I shall be mainly concerned.3

Whatever its specific subject matter, Michelet's text is always structured by a principle of antithesis that determines the selection of its elements and generates chains of variations. The *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*, for instance, a brilliant exercise in forensic rhetoric published in 1831, is a forty-page amplification of the initial proposition that the history of the world is a struggle of man against nature (expanded, even in the first sentence, to include spirit against

3 The rediscovery of Michelet has proceeded more slowly among literary critics than among historians. Michelet's use of sources was studied by Gustave Rudler in his *Michelet historien de Jeanne d'Arc* (Paris, 1925), Michelet's rhetoric by Lucien Refort in *L'Art de Michelet dans son oeuvre historique* (Paris, 1923). Oscar Haac's *Les Principes inspirateurs de Michelet* (Paris, 1951), a Yale doctoral dissertation, is concerned largely with the history of ideas, as are the essay by Edmund Wilson in *To the Finland Station* (New York, 1940) and the monumental thesis of Paul Viallaneix, *La Voie royale* (Paris, 1959; 2nd ed. 1971). In two University of London lectures, *Michelet interprète de la figure humaine* (London, 1961), Jean Pommier raises interesting questions, but in a suggestive rather than a systematic way. Bachelard’s frequent references to Michelet, notably to the natural history writings, are not determined primarily by a concern with Michelet's text as such. Similarly Bataille’s brief essay on *La Sorcière* in *La Littérature et le mal* (Paris, 1957) is a restatement of themes essential to Bataille. They do seem pertinent to Michelet, but Bataille does not do more here than suggest that they are.

There have been three outstanding recent studies of Michelet in France: Roland Barthes, *Michelet par lui-même* (Paris, 1954); Georges Poulet, “Michelet et le moment d'Eros,” *NRF* 178 (1967), 610-35; and Michel Serres, “Le Tricorne et l'amour sorcier,” *Critique* (January 1968), 57-69. Poulet emphasizes Michelet's concern with the fête and with a time different from and discontinuous with clock time. Serres' review of a recent edition of *La Sorcière* points up the richly poetic, indeed mythical character of Michelet's writing. Roland Barthes’ short book is still the most fertile and suggestive study of Michelet to date. Brilliantly essayistic, it refrains from offering a total interpretation of Michelet's work, aiming, it seems, not to foreclose the signifying power of Michelet's or its own, and it is this restraint that makes further commentary both difficult and inevitable. A later essay by Barthes appeared in a special number of *L'Arc* devoted to Michelet in 1973.

Surprisingly, one of the most interesting recent studies of Michelet appeared in England. In "A Cycle in historical discourse: Barante, Thierry, Michelet" (20th Century Studies, 3 [May 1970], 110-30), Stephen Bann analyses the structure of Michelet’s text (authorial presence in the text, relation of narrative and notes, of text and sources) and draws some illuminating conclusions concerning Michelet’s conception and practice of the historian’s craft.

There is a very full bibliography in Viallaneix and an even more complete one in H. Talvert and J. Place, *Bibliographie des auteurs modernes de langue française*, XV (Paris, 1963).

A special number of the journal *Europe* (November-December, 1973) appeared too late for me to take account of several interesting articles in it, notably Linda Orr, “Les ‘Alternatives bizarres’ de Michelet” (pp. 117-31). Professor Orr’s reading of Michelet and my own seem quite close.
matter, freedom against fate). Like the *Histoire romaine*, which appeared in the same year, this early text offers a rich repertoire of variations on the nature-man antithesis, any one of which, thanks to the symmetry of the series and the frequent recurrence of its individual elements, evokes all the others. The variations include Orient: Occident; *rus* (the vast shapeless plain with its monstrous idols); *urbs* (the walled city, in which “il faut se faire tout petits pour tenir”); the fertile and luxuriant river valley: the high and arid desert or plateau; the boundless ocean: the island, rock or jutting promontory. More generally, the amorphous and undifferentiated: the delimited and differentiated; the food-gathering: the pastoral or agricultural; the moist: the dry; the liquid: the solid; the warm: the very hot or very cold; the soft and yielding: the hard and penetrating; the heavy and earthbound: the light and airy; the continuous: the discontinuous; the open: the closed; passive: active; nature: reason; life: death; and, of course, female: male — the rose and the nightingale of Rücker’s oriental poems, to which Michelet frequently alludes.4

In the *Introduction à l’histoire universelle* these oppositions — geographical, geological, climactic, historical, cultural, philosophical, sexual — order the disposition of the large units, such as Asia and Europe, and of the smaller units within the larger ones. In relation to India, for instance, Persia is the occident of the orient, and in relation to Egypt, Judaea is the West of the Middle East. Germany — “vaste, vague, flottante et féconde” — is “l’Inde de l’Europe,” Italy is its occident. Like water to stone, the flowing to the fixed, “l’indécise Allemagne,” its “fleuves vagues,” its uncertain boundaries, its migrant populations with their sentimentality and their “œil bleu pâle comme un ciel douteux,” is symmetrically opposed to Italy, “le

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4 J. J. Bachofen, whose scheme of cultural history is identical to the one Michelet outlines in the *Introduction*, was subsequently to discover almost all Michelet’s imagery in the mythical material itself. See *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen* (Princeton, 1967), Bollingen Series, 84.

A passage on geography in *La Montagne* [1867] (Paris, 1899, pp. 137-39) illustrates Michelet’s use of the categories of male and female. The unity of the earth is assured by its circularity, according to Michelet, but this unity embraces two uneven and unequal continents. One, the Old World, is distributed horizontally along an East-West axis; the other, the New World, is distributed vertically along a North-South axis. The Old World is immensely rich, fecund, self-contained — “parfait, complet en soi” — feminine. The New World, piercing a passage through the seas, is masculine; it is compared to a dragon or a wasp, and is also described as a lawgiver (“la haute affaire de l’Amérique est de régler les feux, les eaux”). The complementarity of opposites — male and female, new and old, vertical and horizontal, active and passive, law and nature — is thus inscribed, for Michelet, in the very configuration of the globe.
monde artificiel de la cité,” the world of lawyers, mathematicians and measurers (“d’harmonie, de rythme et de nombre”), where men live in marble palaces and even the gardens are of stone. As the essay progresses, the oppositions are increasingly internalized. Both sets of principles are represented in Greece, one by the Spartans, the other by the Athenians, one by the Dorian, the other by the Ionian; at Rome they are contained within a single city in the conflict between patricians and plebeians. In imperial Rome the orientalized occident finally encounters the occidentalized orient, as the eclectic oriental life and mother cultures, which have overwhelmed the once parochial and aristocratic city, confront the heroic and exclusive religion of Christ, the West of the East, with its glorification of the ultimate limit, death. Later still, in the conflict of England and France, the principle of negativity, the heroic principle at its most intense, but with all its exclusiveness, ferocity and impiety, confronts what for Michelet was to be the final synthesis in which negativity has been subsumed, relieved of its burden of violence and hatred. No wonder the opposition of England and France is the “guerre des guerres, le combat des combats” in relation to which “le reste est épisode.” It is the latest version of the struggle outlined in the opening paragraph of Michelet’s essay, the meaning and the culmination of universal history.

Orient and occident, liquid and solid, vegetable and mineral, inclusive and exclusive, or, in a slightly different register, sacerdotalism and democracy, silence and speech, symbol and interpretation, the unity and the division of the sign — these pairs pattern Michelet’s work as surely as up and down, right and left, pattern the world of everyday experience. The witch, “la sorcière,” is identified by her relation to the warm, the vegetable, the liquid, the inclusive,

5 Introduction à l’histoire universelle, ed. Charles Morazé, (Paris, 1962), 55. All references to this text are to this edition. See likewise the description of the Greek and Roman city in Le Peuple, part II, chapter vi, ed. Lucien Refort, (Paris, 1946), 174. All references to this text are to this edition.

6 Tableau de la France in Histoire de France, livre III. Paris, J. Hetzel et cie., 5 vols., I, 220. All references to the Histoire de France are to this edition. The Tableau is one of several texts presented by Morazé along with the Introduction à l’histoire universelle. The passage quoted is on p. 150 of this edition.

7 In the Histoire romaine the Etruscans are presented as silent, mysterious, enclosed, aloof, the Romans as talkative, open, vagrant. The language of the Etruscans is a poetic language of symbolic gesture, that of the Romans is an articulated verbal code. Thus Tarquin, to whom his father has sent a messenger to advise him how he should act, strikes down “avec une baguette les têtes des pavots les plus élevés. Sextus comprend qu’il faut faire périr les principaux Gabians. Voilà bien le langage symbolique de la muette Etrurie.” (2nd ed., Paris, 1839, I, 112).
the popular, while her enemies, the Church and the castle, are 

identified by their relation to the cold, the mineral, the hard, the 
exclusive and repressive. On the one hand “l'humble flot des tièdes 
larmes,” on the other “la dure cité de cristal dans lequel un dogme 
terrible a cru enterrer la vie.” The mind of man in the Middle Ages, 
says Michelet, is “pétrifié, cristallisé de Saint Thomas,” closed to life, 
“aux forces végétatives.”

The terms in these antithetical structures acquire meaning in 
relation to each other, in relation to the series of which they are part, 
and in relation to the series to which they are antithetically opposed. They acquire value and are marked by a plus or minus sign according 
to their position on a line which, for Michelet, advances from 
East to West,9 from water to rock, from female to male.

The language in which Michelet recounts this advance is suffi- 
ciently varied to accommodate comfortably a number of different 
readings. The movement from East to West appears as a movement 
from the food-gathering stage in the history of culture through the 
pastoral stage to the agricultural one; from a Vichean age of Gods 
(“la mystérieuse hiérarchie des castes orientales”), through an age of 
Heroes (“l'aristocratie héroïque”) and a revolt of the famuli or 
plebeians, to an age of Men (“la démocratie moderne”)10; from the 
dependency of the male on the woman and his subordination to her 
in infancy,11 through the trauma of separation, to the reconcilia-
tion by which she submits to his respectful authority. Like most early 
nineteenth century thinkers (Görres, Friedrich Schlegel, his own 
friend Edgar Quinet), Michelet associates the origin and source of

8 La Sorcière, présentation de Robert Mandrou (Paris, 1964), 100, 102. All refer-
ences to this text are to this edition. Cf. Bible de l'humanité (2nd ed., Paris, 1864, p. 55, 
note), where the closeness of the Eastern gods to man, their creator, is contrasted with 
their reification by Europeans: “tout cela est fluide encore dans les Vedas. Dans la 
Grèce homérique . . . tout est déjà pétrifié.”

9 Cf. Le Peuple, 246: “. . . le grand mouvement humain . . . de l'Inde à la Grèce, à 
Rome, et de Rome à nous.”

10 Introduction à l'histoire universelle, 66.

11 The earliest societies are described by Michelet as enclosed behind “des murs 
cyclopéens” (notably in the Histoire romaine). While the term “cyclopéen” denoted 
barbarism and, more specifically, a certain type of primitive masonry, it is unlikely 
that Michelet did not want to exploit the association of the Cyclops with primitive 
subordination to the mother, to the female, on whose behalf they helped to over-
throw the father, Cronos, subsequently associated with Chronos, time, progress. 
Sacerdotalism and priests in general are always, for Michelet, the enemies of the male, 
of the father; see, for instance, Histoire de la Révolution, Book 8, ch. 2, Paris, J. Hetzel et 
cie., 4 vols., II, 388-89 (all subsequent references to this text are to this edition); Le 
379, 523, 525.
life with the Orient.12 Man hangs here on the mother’s breast — “pauvre enfant sur le sein de sa mère, faible et dépendante créature, gâté et battu tour à tour, moins nourri qu’enivré d’un lait trop fort pour lui.”13 At the other end of the line, for Michelet, stands the modern peasant, notably the modern French peasant, lawfully possessing the land — terra mater, as Michelet never lost an opportunity of reminding the reader — living on it, loving it, defending it, tilling and tending it. The modern peasant in Michelet’s writing marks the culmination of all the developments — individual, cultural, socio-political — to which his history can be thought of as referring. He stands for the cultivation of the land, rather than the short-sighted, selfish exploitation of it by the transient herdsman, for a society of equal owner-workers, rather than of rapacious feudal overlords, for the renunciation of aggression and immediate gratification in favor of a protective, productive, at once paternal and filial relation to the woman. “Sobriété” and “jeûne” are the virtues of Michelet’s peasants.14

Each segment of the historical process, in Michelet’s narrative, is open to the same variety of interpretations as the overall pattern of universal history outlined in the Introduction. The age-old conflict of England and France, for instance, the “guerre des guerres”, that dominates a large part of the Histoire de France, is presented in terms that invite a psychoanalytical reading. The French king is described as the lawful sovereign and the father. “Il régente le roi d’Angleterre comme son vassal et son fils, mauvais fils qui bat son père.” His complexion is pale. The descendant of the Conqueror, on the other hand, whoever he is, is “un homme rouge, gros ventre, brave, audacieux, sensuel, glouton et ricaneur, entouré de mauvaises gens, violent et brutal, fort mal avec l’Eglise.” The King of France rules lawfully and in peace; the English king “gouverne à coups de lance trois ou quatre peuples dont il n’entend pas la langue.” The King of France is “fils aîné de l’Eglise, fils légitime, l’autre est le bâtard, le fils de la violence. C’est Ismael et Isaac. . . . Dans ce grand mystère du douzième siècle, le roi de France joue le personnage du bon Dieu, l’autre celui du Diable. . . . ‘C’est l’usage dans notre famille, disait Richard Coeur de Lion, que les fils haissent les pères; du diable nous

13 Introduction à l’histoire universelle, 36.
14 Le Peuple, 35.
venons, et nous retournons au diable.’ Patience. Le roi du bon Dieu aura son tour. Le roi d’Angleterre peut lui voler sa femme et ses provinces; mais il recouvrera tout un matin.”

In this account of the struggle of England and France, the aggressor, the parricide, the figure of the evil son confronts, in neat antitheses, the father or the elder brother, the legitimate ruler, the good son; but the allusion to Ishmael and Isaac evokes also a traditional cultural conflict between the antique couple of the tiller of the soil and the grazer of cattle or sheep, the sedentary and the shifting. The opposition of France and England also includes an alimentary opposition of grain eaters and eaters of red meat, of vegetable and animal — the King of France “grandit d’une végétation puissante”, while the English are “une race de bouchers” — and a political opposition of two societies, one aggressive, aristocratic, imperialist, exploiting, the other just, democratic, peace-loving and pious, in the Virgilian sense, one a capitalist and industrial society, the other a predominantly peasant and artisanal one. “Les Anglais... émigrent où il y a profit. Ils disent le pays; nous disons la patrie. Chez nous l’homme et la terre se tiennent, et ils ne se quitteront pas; il y a entre eux légitime mariage, à la vie, à la mort. Le Français a épousé la France. La France est une terre d’équité. Elle a généralement, en cas douteux, adjugé la terre à celui qui travaillait la terre. L’Angleterre au contraire a prononcé pour le seigneur, chassé le paysan; elle n’est plus cultivée que par des ouvriers.”

Yet the cultural reading of the England-France conflict in turn refers back to a psychoanalytic one, as the passages just quoted will already have indicated. The herdsman, according to the Origines du Droit (1837) has not imposed order on his natural, instinctive life. He is “un sacrilège qui ne connaît ni borne ni limite, il ne respecte point la terre, cette terre sacrée” — terra always mater — “qui boit la sueur de l’homme et dont l’homme mange le grain.” The peasant, on the other hand, stands for culture and law. With him the selfishness of

15 Histoire de France, I, 288-89.
16 Ibid., 290.
18 Le Peuple, 33. Cf. Histoire de la Révolution, II, 378 (Book 8, ch. 1): “En tout cas douteux, en tout litige entre la propriété et le travail, elle (the Revolution) décida pour le travail (base originaire de la propriété, propriété la plus sacrée de toutes). Tandis que l’Angleterre féodale, en Ecosse et partout, a décidé pour le fief contre l’homme, la Révolution, en Bretagne et partout, a décidé pour l’homme contre le fief.”
the herdsman’s relation to the land is transformed into a productive and mutually respectful collaboration. “Le pasteur erre à la surface de la terre; il en est l’infidèle amant. L’agriculteur en est l’époux; il déchire sa verte ceinture, il y dépose le double germe du grain et de la sœur . . . L’union fixe de l’homme et de la femme produit tôt ou tard un autre mariage, celui de l’homme et de la terre.”19 Similarly, in *La Sorcière* an alimentary opposition evokes a series of others: the conflict of female and male, past and present, tradition and progress, continuity and discontinuity. Woman is described as “herbivore et frugivore” — her diet is “lacté, végétal.”20

The circulation of meanings, the interchange of languages cannot be stopped. Each system — the philosophical, the phylogenetic, the psychogenetic, the economic, the political — signifies and is signified by all the others. Each calls up all the others. The opposition of the herdsman and the crop-grower, of animal and vegetable, of pastoral and arable, opens on to other oppositions: the bad son and the good son, the consumer and the producer, the aristocrat and the peasant, the rebel individualist or entrepreneur and the modest, patient, petit bourgeois. “Il faut,” Michelet observed suggestively, “se faire tout petits pour tenir dans la cité.”21 Like his account of the witch, Michelet’s account of the conflict of England and France is in the full sense of the word a legend.22

Whatever its specific subject — political history, social history, natural history, autobiography, social criticism — Michelet’s text almost invariably assumes the structure of the myths in which he himself was so keenly interested. Throughout his work there is a recurrent pattern of nostalgia for nature, the origins, the mother, and, at the same time, fear of them, longing to escape “la fatalité du ventre” and to establish a distance from nature, “le gouffre où tout

19 *Origines du droit français, cherchées dans les symboles et formules du droit universel* (Paris, Calmann Levy, n.d.) 77-78, and *Introduction*, xviii. Michelet tends in this passage to give family relations as the model of larger economic and cultural relations. Bachofen, on the other hand, while emphasizing that man’s relation to the earth, to the field “encompassed agriculture and sexual union in one concept and one mystery . . . provided one justice for field and family,” makes religion and culture prior to family structure: “Agriculture is the prototype of the marriage bond between man and woman. It is not the earth that imitates woman, but woman who imitates the earth. The ancients looked on marriage as an agrarian relationship, and borrowed the whole terminology of marriage law from agricultural conditions” (Bachofen, 193-195).

20 *La Sorcière*, 116.

21 *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, 41.

22 “Thus he could write in *La Sorcière* (p. 54) that “les premiers siècles du moyen âge ont le caractère d’un rêve.”
retombe, se confond, s’efface.” And both the rejection of the mother and the desire for her are presented in the texts as criminal.

The memory of his mother and the longing for her is a frequent topic of Michelet’s autobiographical texts, from those of his early manhood to those of his old age, and Michelet himself claims to see in his life an ever renewed attempt to recover the mother, to enter into that immediacy from which, from his earliest knowledge, he was always removed. “Impressionné,” he notes in 1842, “de cette idée qu’il n’y a d’amour complet qu’entre proches. Alfred me disait qu’il avait été très sensible à la grâce physique de sa mère. Moi aussi, en souvenir de ma mère, j’ai toujours aimé des femmes plus âgées que moi. . . . Tel fut mon premier attachement” — to his first wife, Pauline Rousseau, seven years his senior. “Elle me parut aimable et désirable, quoiqu’âgée, parce qu’elle ressemblait à ma mère.”

The mother that Michelet presents as the object of his desire bears little resemblance, however, to the mother he tells us she had. He does not recall his childhood, he says, as a period of happiness, fulfillment, and immediacy. It is, on the contrary, already, from the beginning, marked by separation, absence and loss. “Moi, mon enfance, et la fin de l’Empire,” he notes in the Journal. “. . . Aujourd’hui, cette époque où les années sont marquées par des victoires semble toute lumineuse. Mais alors tout était sombre. Sombre était la France; la lumière ne brillait que sur l’armée, hors de France . . . Le principe de la Révolution, qui avait donné l’essor à ces grandes guerres, était parfaitement oublié.” Already, then, the glory had gone, the fêtes of the Revolution were over and only the memory of them was left. Likewise, in his personal life, he tells, he encountered only signs, never the fullness of reality — “ne voyant rien de la nature que le Jardin des Plantes, le bord de l’eau. Nulle autre société que ma mère malade, inquiète jusqu’à ne jamais prévoir le

23 *Journal*, II, 308 (15.8.1856).


25 Alfred Dumesnil, the son of Mme Dumesnil, subsequently Michelet’s son-in-law and collaborator.


28 *Journal*, II, 621-23 (23.8.1845).
jour la nourriture du lendemain.” How different this mother is from the dream of la mère patrie — “elle prévoit et pourvoit . . . elle enveloppe l’homme d’un puissant embrasement.”29 There is nothing in Michelet’s writing comparable with Quinet’s words on the death of his mother — “Assurément les fêtes de la terre sont finies . . . Tout s’clipse d’un deuil irréparable; ce qui était la fête a disparu.”30 On the contrary, for Michelet, the fête and the mother, those two synonyms of continuity and immediacy, are both, from the beginning, already withdrawing from him, already inhabited by time and death, mere wasted signs of a presence that cannot even be recollected. “Ma sombre enfance . . . a manqué de fêtes,” he notes in 1854.31

The original co-presence to each other of mother and child, the lost and longed-for state in which together they constitute an autonomous and self-contained universe, has from the beginning a mythical quality. Michelet’s sorceress conceives and gives birth by parthenogenesis. “Seule elle conçut et enfanta.”32 There is no Other in the original world of the One, and the Father and his law are absent from the community of the Mutterrecht.33 According to Michelet, the popular language preserves the idea of a euphoric being-together of mother and child, at once two and one, in the expression “heureux comme un poisson dans l’eau.” That is to say, in Michelet’s own commentary, “tou à la fois embrassé et isolé par la substance onctueuse qui rend sa peau, ses écailles glissantes et imperméables.”34

Most often the images of this euphoric being together in Michelet’s work are images of liquidity,35 like the vaisseau hollandais, that other “poisson dans l’eau,” to which Barthes refers in one of the chapter titles of his book on Michelet. The elements in this world of harmony and contentment are related to each other as container to

29 Ibid., II, 627 (23.9.1845).
32 La Sorcière. 28. See also La Mer [1861] ed. Pierre Loti, Paris, (1898), 127-28, where Michelet presents parthenogenesis as the original natural mode of reproduction.
33 Bachofen’s Mutterrecht appeared in 1861, the same year as La Mer.
34 La Mer, 225-26.
35 Images of liquidity, milk, warmth and enveloping water always signal closeness and intimacy. Thus the first education of the child, says Michelet, should come to him “fluide, tieue, douce, vivante” (Le Prêtre [1854], Paris, 1861, p. 293).
contained; there are no breaks, no discontinuities; the people are to the barge as the barge itself is to the water that sustains it. Inevitably, the fathers are again of no consequence and the mothers rule these watery communities. “Douceur et excellence de la femme... Il faut les voir, sur les bateaux, étendant le linge, soignant les enfants, dirigeant même le gouvernail. Je comprends bien maintenant le gros bateau rond hollandais, si bien ponté. C’est l’arche de Noé, qui doit contenir toute une famille, homme, femme, enfants, animaux.” Analogous to the barge is the belly of the whale, all absorbing, yet gentle; having neither “dents” nor “scie” — “nul de ces moyens de supplice dont les destructeurs du monde sont si abondamment pourvus.” The whale, indeed, is a privileged creature in Michelet’s bestiary. Its coming into being coincides with a unique moment in the history of nature when the early cruel gestation period, with its chaotic and unclassifiable creations, is over, and the first separate, definable forms are beginning to appear. It was then that “il y eut un petit moment (quelque deux mille années peut-être) de grande douceur et d’innocence, où sur terre parurent ces êtres excellents qui aiment tant leur famille, la portent sur eux et en eux, la font, s’il le faut, rentrer dans leur sein. Sur l’eau parurent les bons géants.” Thus a unique moment in the history of nature is marked by a unique creature whose kindness and gentleness are based on no division and no repression. The whale has the virtues of humanity, yet it lives in harmony with its animal nature.

Since unity and enclosedness are postulated as the original condition, differentiation and separation can be conceived of only as violent and painful. For the mother, the act of separation, the projection of the child out of herself, is a self-inflicted wound. “La mère dira: toute division est contre nature; je garde en moi mon petit.” It is by an act of supreme love and sacrifice, accomplished in pain, that the child is released from union with her. “Il faut que la mère veuille le déchirement de la mère, l’opération césarienne,

36 Journal, I, 239 (11.7.1837).
38 La Mer, 238.
39 The “beau sang rouge ardent” of the whale sets it above the vegetable realm. “Ceci est la vraie fleur du monde,” says Michelet, “Toute la Création à sang pâle... languissante, végétante relativement, a l’air de n’avoir pas de coeur, si on la compare à la vie généreuse qui bouillonne dans cette pourpre... La force du monde supérieur, son charme, sa beauté, c’est le sang” (La Mer, 239). The blood of the whale is the blood that circulates and animates, however, not the blood of separation and the attempts to overcome it, of death, desire and sexuality.
qu'elle pousse l'enfant hors de son sein.”40 Henceforward, for the
child, frequently designated “le petit mari” or “l'innocent rival” of
the father,41 a sombre interdiction hangs over the mother from
whom he has been violently separated and with whom he longs
instinctively to be reunited. To maintain his identity the little male
must guard his distance from the female, the great source of life, the
suffering, yet all-absorbing one, at once mère, giver of life, and
marâtre, menace of death. Michelet himself provides an inexhausti-
ble repertoire of contents for this mythical mould. The couple
male/female is associated throughout his work, as we saw, with other
couples: culture/nature, occident/orient, prose/poetry, history/myth.

Not surprisingly, the mythical theme of incest is everywhere pre-
sent in Michelet’s writing. As in the myths, incest represents both the
natural and perfect original form of human relations, the object of
much human longing, — "il n'y a d'amour complet qu'entre
proches"42 — and the sterility of an enclosed, repetitive existence, of
a community without real differentiation or otherness, and conse-
quently without history. “Que l'homme ait deux femmes, sa mère et
sa maîtresse, c'est un crime de la nature. Mais le renouvellement des
générations le demande ainsi, sinon la sérialité, la mort. Pauvre
enfant, comme il revenait à son paradis naturel, d'où le chassa l'épée
de l'archange! Mais il faut l'épée.”43 “Il ne faut pas retourner à la
mer de lait, au paradis maternel. L'identité de la vie circulatoire et
digestive, l'identité de la chair et l'attraction de l'union primitive ne
doit pas prévaloir sur la voix du temps et l'appel divin du progrès . . .
La mère de Théodoric, roi des Goths, le voyant revenir battu, en

40 Journal, II, 307 (8.8.1856); (?1.1857). See also L'Amour [1858] (Paris,
1961), 260.
41 La Mer, 225; Le Prêtre, 285, 296-97.
42 Journal, I, 478 (21.9.1842); cf. ibid., I, 457 (20.7.1842): “La fin suprême de la
famille serait qu'entre les trois personnes il n'y eût plus ni sexe, ni âge, que le fils fût le
père de ses parents, l'époux de sa mère”; ibid., I, 479-80 (30.9.1842): “La nuit, encore
le rêve de César que Jésus il y a deux ans: Il me semblait que je disais à ma mère mon
indigence d'amour. Elle disait: Eh bien! prends ici, mon enfant.” See also II, 479-81
(19.7.1859). In the Histoire de France (I, 18), the ancient Gauls are described as “se
mêlant avec tous et en tout, dissolus par légèreté, se roulant à l'aveugle, au hasard,
dans les plaisirs infâmes.” These pleasures are characterized in a note as adulterous
and incestuous. In La Sorcière, “Satan faisait au fils un grand mérite de rester fidèle à
la mère, tenait ce crime pour vertu” (p. 143).
43 Journal, I, 579 (1.9.1844). Thus in La Mer, the jellyfish is seen as striving and
failing to transcend its limited and enclosed existence. It is, says Michelet, as if the
jellyfish “se repent d'un essai de liberté si hasardeuse, qu'elle regrette l'état inférieur,
la sécurité de la vie commune. Le polypier fait la méduse, la méduse fait le polypier.
Elle rentre à l'association” (pp. 167-68).
dérouté, lève sa robe, montre sa vulve et dit: Est-ce là que vous voulez rentrer et vous réfugier? L’enfant dirait généralement oui et la mère de même. Mais le temps dit non. Le progrès dit: Deviens homme, ne reste pas dans la femme, si tu veux féconder la fille ou la femme d’avenir.”

Object of a dire prohibition, the mother in Michelet, as in the myths to which his text frequently alludes, becomes a source of terror, bestial herself and bent on turning all who fall into her clutches into beasts, at once Circe and Sphinx — “la tout aimable et toute féconde, la dangereuse aussi, l’homicide . . . la mère à fois et l’amante, la mère incestueuse qui nous fait et nous propose la séduction, nous fait jouir d’elle, nous caresse, nous saoule et nous tue . . . Faut-il que tant de larmes versées au désert n’aient pas purifié cette incestueuse Circé. Je voudrais la voir pure et divine. Mais je la souille de mes désirs, ou elle moi de ses caresses.”

The late medieval sorceress, the degenerate version of the fée, “l’outrageuse Circé,” is accused of devouring children. “Sous forme tendre et maternelle, la belle dame caressante n’est-elle pas un vampire pour épouser le sang du faible?”

The image of liquidity, so alluring in the description of the vaisseau hollandais, becomes threatening, engulfing, destructive of humanity, virility, and individuality. The sea itself, the original mother of all, the source of life for Michelet, takes on a sinister, deceptive, seductive aspect. It becomes a devouring animal. “Cette mer si bleue,” Michelet notes at Boulogne, as he is about to cross to England in 1834, “a englouti il y a un an les deux cents femmes de l’Amphitrite.”

The sea now is darkness — “laide, d’affreuse mine,”

44 Ibid., II, 321 (? 1857). Cf. a similar passage in Introduction à l’histoire universelle, p. 73.
45 Journal, I, 119 (13.7.1834). Circe is, of course, the ancestor of la sorcière, who also entertains incestuous relations with her son (Histoire romaine, I, 39; La Sorcière, 143).
46 La Sorcière, 153. Cf. the description of Diane de Poitiers in the Histoire de France (III, 338): “Grande véritablement, énormément rapace, miraculeusement absorbante. La baleine, le léviathan, sont de faibles images. Elle avale Anet et Chenonceaux, le duché de Valentinois. Mais qu’est-ce que cela? Elle avale le don du nouveau règne, exigeant que tout ce qu’on payait pour renouvellement de charges, confirmation de privilèges, lui fut payé à elle-même.” In the Bible de l’humanité (p. 11) Anquetil Duperron, the pioneer orientalist, is described as being set upon not only by wild beasts and by disease, but by woman — “Les créoles européennes, les bayadères, les sultanes, toute cette luxurieuse Asie s’efforce de détourner son élan vers la lumière. Elles font signe de leurs terrasses, l’invitent. Il ferme les yeux. Sa bayadère, sa sultane, c’est le vieux livre indéchiffrable.”
47 Journal, I, 121 (6.8.1834). The allure of the group sea-orient-woman is conveyed in La Sorcière: “C’est l’Orient, c’est le paradis retrouvé. De l’Asie qu’on a cru détruire, une incomparable aurore surgit, dont le rayonnement porte au loin jusqu’à
“ruineuse d’étendue,” “monde de ténèbres” — a grave, filled with victims, “noire solitude, rien que sable et arides cailloux, sauf des ossements et des débris, tant de biens perdus que l’élément avere prend toujours et ne rend jamais.”

Suddenly, immediacy no longer represents being at home, it now appears menacing and alien. “L’eau de mer ne nous rassure aucunement par la transparence. Elle est opaque et lourde; elle frappe fort . . . Elle aide, il est vrai, le nageur, mais elle le maîtrise; il se sent comme un faible enfant, bercé d’une puissante main, qui peut aussi bien le briser.”

Above all, the sea is the realm of animality, the home of every conceivable monster — “les mangeurs d’hommes, le léviathan, le kraken et le grand serpent de mer.” All the primitive powers of the past lie in wait in these depths, all that men, to be men, have had to reject out of themselves. The observer is seized with horror at the vision of “un épouvantable mob, d’une horrible populace” — let us note in passing the doubling in Michelet of the mere-marâtre couple with a peuple-populace couple — “non d’hommes mais de chiens aboyants, un million, un milliard de dogues acharnés, ou plutôt fous . . . Mais que dis-je des chiens, des dogues? ce n’était pas cela encore. C’étaient des apparitions exécrables et innommées, des bêtes sans yeux ni oreilles, n’ayant que des gueules écumantes.”

Horrifying vision indeed of the primal chaos, of forms still undefined, unclassified, unordered, devouring, dismembered and dismembering.

As the sea is approached, all individuality, all differentiation shrivels. The most alluring and treacherous areas are those which

percer la profonde brume de l’ouest. C’est un monde de nature et d’art que l’ignorance avait maudit, mais qui, maintenant, avance pour conquérir ses conquérants, dans une douce guerre d’amour et de séduction maternelle.” (p. 101). Though this passage concerns the fourteenth century, Michelet writes of the revival of Oriental studies in his own time in the same terms (Bible de l’humanité, bk. 1, ch. 1), as did his friend Quinet (Génie des religions, 75-100). On the other hand, Michelet thrice records an episode on the beach at Le Havre, where his daughter throws pebbles out to sea and he is overwhelmed by the frailty of man’s efforts compared to the inexhaustible power of nature (Journal, 1, 83 [1831]; ibid., 1, 316 [1839]; and after Adèle’s death in La Mer [p. 12], where the sea is finally triumphant over the dead child). To the celebration of the mer de lait in the Bible (“Reçois-moi donc, grand poème! . . . Que j’y plonge! . . . C’est la mer de lait” [p. 3]) must be opposed the interdiction cited earlier — “Il ne faut pas retourner à la mer de lait.”

48 La Mer, 85-86, 5.
49 The association of bercer with briser and battre is frequent throughout Michelet’s writing: cf. Histoire de France, 1, 186; Introduction à l’histoire universelle, 36.
50 La Mer, 85-86. On the significance of this imagery for Michelet’s attitude to time and history, see a provocative article by Alain Besançon, “Cronos et Chronos: note sur la relation au temps de l’histoire,” in Herméneutique et Eschatologie, ed. Enrico Castelli (Paris, 1971), 275-93.
are neither one thing nor another, where there are no limits, and no law differentiates and defends one class of beings from another, land from sea, male from female, men from beasts: the marshlands, where the trunks of trees shrink to puny proportions, the “sables équivoques” that turn out to be quicksands, the virgin forest, the tropical savannah, the mistcovered moor. In the *Histoire de la Révolution*, the Revolution is “light of lights,” a striving for clarity, definition, transparency; the opposition to the Revolution, from women and priests, is strongest in the damp, misty, maritime provinces of the Atlantic — “aux landes du Morbihan, le long des îles brumeuses, aux sombres fourrés du Maine, dans l’humide labyrinthe du bocage vendéen.” The uncertainty of life in the Middle Ages, “la pente horriblement glissante par laquelle l’homme libre devient *vassal*, — le vassal *serviteur*, et le serviteur *serf*,” is represented as a damp, deceptive and insalubrious terrain. “La terre visqueuse retient le pied, enracine le passant. L’air contagieux le tue, c’est à dire le fait *de main morte*, un mort, un néant, une bête.” In the midst of this dehumanising indeterminateness, liberty sits on a boundary stone, “sur une borne,” that is, she marks out limits and establishes identities, protecting men from degradation and bestialisation. In a strikingly parallel passage of the *Journal*, Michelet recounts in his own name having once been caught and sucked down by quicksands, and having saved himself by clutching at a rock that happened to be close by. Similarly, in his biography of Athénais Mialaret, he relates how at Francisbad in Austria, the priest-ridden country par excellence for Michelet, she stepped unsuspectingly into a beautiful green meadow and was drawn down. “La prairie était un marais.”

The natural history writings provide the most lurid descriptions of such terrains. Many passages of *L’Insecte* evoke the terrors of the

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51 *La Mer*, 7. The relation of the raging sea and the shrunk trees here is paralleled in *La Sorcière*, where the “furie sensuelle . . . folle ostentation de débauche” of the medieval châtelaines, “grandes dames de fiefs, effrénées Jézébels,” is contrasted with the puniness of their menfolk, “les vaincus d’Azincourt, pauvre génération de seigneurs épuisés qui, dans les miniatures, font gorlotter encore à voir sous un habit perfidement serré leurs tristes membres amaigris” (p. 152).


53 *La Sorcière*, 54.

54 Ibid., 52. Cf. the explanation and justification of the caste system by which the Aryans are said to have protected themselves from “les caresses et l’invitation d’une trop charmante nature” in India (*Bible*, 39-41).

55 *La Mer*, 18-19.

56 “*Mémoires d’une jeune fille honnête,*” *Journal*, II, 584. Cf. the description, in the
tropical savannah, which turns out to be a heaving mass of living creatures. The deeper one delves into this primal foundation of life, the fiercer and more horrendous the instruments of dismemberment with which the monsters that inhabit it are endowed. “Ces eaux vertes, si paisibles, d'où s'entendent par moments quelques soupirs étouffés, si vous y mettiez le pied, vous verriez avec terreur que ce sont des eaux solides. . . . Qu'un être vivant paraisse, tout lève la tête, tout grouille; on voit dans toute sa terreur se dresser l'étrange assemblée. . . . Ces monstres eux-mêmes qui règnent à la surface, ils ont en-dessous des tyrans. Le piranga, poisson-rasoir, aussi rapide que le caiman est lourd, de la fine scie de ses dents, avant qu'il ait pu se tourner, lui coupe la queue et l'emporte.”57 In L'Oiseau the role of the savannah is assigned to the virgin forest. Once more it is a world of scarcely differentiated forms half merging still with the primeval slime, a world neither earth nor water but dominated by mud, by armies of dismembering insects, and by the always horrifying reptile, which neither walks nor flies nor swims, the closest of all living creatures to the primai chaos. (Reptile and bird, mud and air are, like East and West, key points on the Michelet compass). The precarious and hard-won identity of the self is threatened here — literally — with disintegration. “Si vous cédiez à fatigue, une armée silencieuse d'anatomistes implacables prendrait possession de vous, et d'un million de lancettes ferait de tous vos tissus une admirable dentelle, une gaze, un souffle, un néant.”58

In this world of destruction and terror, the sea, which elsewhere appears as that which unites, as the great mediator of the

Histoire romaine (I, 71), of the Maremma, the flat coastal plain around Leghorn and Pisa: “Des champs féconds, de belles forêts, et tout cela, c'est la mort.”


58 L'Oiseau [1856] (Paris, 1936), 33. Although I have selected passages from the natural history writings, which date from the 1850's and 60's, the imagery is not new at that time. A typical passage in the Introduction à l'histoire universelle of 1831 describes India — “the womb of the world” (in English in the text): “A Bénarès, la terre donne trois moissons par an. Une pluie d'orage fait d'une lande une prairie. Le roseau du pays, c'est le bambou de soixante pieds de haut; l'arbre, c'est le figuier indien qui, d'une seule racine, donne une forêt. Sous ces végétaux monstrueux vivent des monstres. Le tigre y veille au bord du fleuve, épian l'hippopotame qu'il atteint d'un bond de dix toises; ou bien un troupeau d'éléphants sauvages vient en fureur à travers la forêt, pliant, rompant les arbres à droite et à gauche. Cependant des orages épouvantables déplacent des montagnes, et le choléra-morbis moissonne les hommes par millions” (p. 36). Bachofen constantly returned to the swamp as the figure, in ancient myth, of “tellurian creation,” “the lowest level of animal generation” (Myth, Religion, and Mother Right, 37, 59, 180-81, 191-92, 195 et passim).
continents, is a barrier no man dares cross, the dividing line between the realms of nature and of culture. The boldest sailors are halted by it. "La ligne sombre, éternellement couverte de nuages, qu’on rencontre avant l’équatuer, leur impose. Ils s’arrêtent. Ils disent — ‘C’ est la mer des ténèbres.’ Et ils rentrent chez eux." 

Michelet leaves the reader in no doubt about the gravity of the prohibition that hangs over the sea, or about the nature of the "terreurs un peu enfantines," as he aptly calls them, which it inspires. "Il y aurait de l’impiété à violer ce sanctuaire. Malheur à celui qui suivrait sa curiosité sacrilège! On a vu, aux dernières îles, un colosse, une menaçante figure qui disait: ‘N’allez pas plus loin’!" For the poet, as for the sailor, the danger — like the attraction — is great. The monotonous moan of the sea, its infinite indifferentiation — "toujours, toujours le même son" — attacks man in his humanity, in his identity, in his powers of discrimination, in his language. Day and night merge in sleeplessness, words fail, and the writer loses the most delicate of his artistic senses, the sense of rhythm. After a prolonged stay by the sea, Michelet tells, his writing began to suffer. "La phrase venait inharmonique."

The tale of Prince Georges Cantacuzène, in the biography of Athénaïs, provides a graphic illustration of the fate that awaits the temerarious. The Prince is portrayed as a demented satyr, "pauvre Caliban désarmé," stricken in his virility and wandering fitfully through the rooms of the palace over which his wife now rules with undisputed authority. The cause of the Prince’s degradation and of the disintegration of his personality? "Le Prince avait pour son malheur trop aimé le . . . et s’était trop épuisé chez les belles Italiennes."

59 La Mer, 33-34.
60 Ibid., 9.
61 Cf. in the Histoire romaine (I, 39) the "inexpiable malédiction" that hangs over the Pelasgi, making them the terror of their simple, heroic and manly neighbors: "Le culte magique de la flamme, ce mystérieux agent de l'industrie, cette action violente de la volonté humaine sur la nature, ce mélange, cette souillure des éléments sacrés, ces traditions des dieux serpents et des hommes dragons de l'orient qui opéraient par le feu et la magie, tout cela effrayait l'imagination des tribus héroïques."
62 La Mer, 6.
63 Ibid., 81.
64 Ibid., 82. Michelet's earliest literary ideas concern thinly disguised incestuous affections which the hero overcomes or discovers to be in the end not incestuous after all; e.g. the "nouvelle imitée d'Ernestine" summarized in the Journal for 7.8.1821 (Ecrits de jeunesse, 157) and the plan for another story which he records in the same month (ibid., 160).
65 La Mer, 251.
Regarded with both horror and fascination, the female, the unalterably other, is replaced in much of Michelet’s writing by the similar or the same. Michelet himself underlines the equivocal character of his intense attachment to Paul Poinsot, the beloved companion of his adolescence. “L’amitié de l’ami de Bicêtre,” he notes, “a toute la douceur d’une amitié de femme.” And he adds in parentheses, with characteristic insight and honesty — “à examiner.”67 Years later, he often described his second wife, Athénaïs Mialaret, as boyish. She was, he says, “plus gamin que ne le sont les autres femmes. Avec une cravate on s’y tromperait tout à fait, sauf la délicatesse des traits et la gentillesse. Je comprends le plaisir que Mme Cantacuzène avait de l’appeler: mon petit Rousseau.”68 Repeating the underlying pattern of the Histoire universelle, the Journal presents Michelet as having enacted with his first wife, Pauline Rousseau, the prohibited and destructive relation with the primitive mother, and as having experienced, in consequence, contempt, self-hatred and terror. In the later relation with Madame Dumesnil, the mother of his student Alfred Dumesnil, Monsieur Dumesnil always looms forbiddingly in the background, and illness soon casts Michelet and Madame Dumesnil in the roles occupied in an earlier text by Michelet and his dying mother. Sacrifice is already a dominant aspect of this relation. With Athénaïs, finally, it is no longer opposites that encounter each other — the male and the female, the child and the dangerous, prohibited mother — but, as in the early friendship with Poinsot or even in Michelet’s strange relation to his own father,69 two beings

67 Journal, 22.6.1820, Écrits de jeunesse, 89-90. Cf. ibid., 98: “Cette liaison-là a je ne sais quoi (dirai-je de romantique?) qui ne se trouve ordinairement que dans l’amour.” Years later, Michelet wrote of this relation as the high point of his existence: “Charme de la première amitié, désir insatiable de communication, enseignement, révélation mutuelle. La parole et le papier me ne suffisaient jamais. Nous nous conduisons et reconduisons bien avant dans la nuit . . . Ah! jours regrettables, vrai paradis sur la terre.” (Le Peuple, 208) From the beginning the friendship with Poinsot was associated with the idea of sacrifice and of a community of men. Cf. letter of 21.5.1820 (Écrits de jeunesse, 254): “Dégagé de l’amour des femmes et le redoutant, cette amitié est maintenant (avec l’amour de l’humanité peut-être) le seul sentiment qui m’occupe.” “Lorsque, pour être juste, je crois devoir enterrer mon coeur tout vivant, la puissance d’aimer que j’avais reçu devient philanthropie . . .”

68 Journal, 11, 88 (2.2.1850). Mme Cantacuzène was a Rumanian princess, living in Vienna, who had employed Athénaïs as a governess prior to her marriage to Michelet.

69 Michelet’s father was seven years younger than his mother and Michelet seems to have thought of him at times as a sibling. He usually presents him as gay, youthful, irresponsible, light, in contrast to the heaviness and seriousness of his mother. Subsequently, Michelet’s first wife, Pauline Rousseau, was jealous of the close relation between the two men, who apparently shared the same room (Journal, 1, 316
who are almost identical — "cet autre moi-même si différent de moi-même. C'est moi et ce n'est pas moi." 70 Like Michelet himself, who has "les deux sexes de l'esprit," Athénaïs is "complète d'esprit, mêlée de sexe et d'âge, enfant, jeune homme et femme," the perfect "camarade." 71 Pauline Rousseau, the radically other, is finally assimilated as mon petit Rousseau.

In this context, it is not surprising that the historian of the Revolution embraced with fervor the Revolutionary ideal of fraternity and that for him it represented the relation of the future, "le vrai noeud de la cité." 72 The heroic friendship of Marceau and Kleber, the modern counterpart of the "mariage viril" of the Scandinavian warriors, for which Michelet had expressed his admiration in the early Origines du droit, 73 offered the model of a relation without otherness, a relation whose terms were identical, aspects of the same. Thus with the grown man, the narcissistic friendship for PoinsoZ recurs as the heroic comradeship in arms of the young men of France, picturesquely portrayed as going off to holy combat, "les baionnettes frémissantes." 74

At the basis of all culture in Michelet’s account, there is a law, a prohibition, the very desire to transgress which fills men with terror, but this law is itself founded on a transgression, by which culture was

[4.9.1839] and note). Michelet’s relation to his father was repeated in important respects in his relation to Alfred Dumesnil, with Mme Dumesnil replacing Mme Michelet.

70 Journal, II, 115 (6.8.1850). Cf. Le Peuple, 205: “Il aime sa nourrice et sa mère... Mais quel est son ravissement, quand il voit pour la première fois un autre, un enfant de son âge, qui est lui, qui n’est pas lui!”


72 Journal, I, 627 (23.9.1845). See also Le Peuple, 205-206. The ideal of the comradeship of arms, particularly in the struggle against tyrants, is common in late eighteenth and nineteenth century literature. The friendship of Posa and Carlos in Schiller’s Don Carlos still inspired Verdi and his librettists Méry and du Locle in the 1860’s.

Michelet always considered that the narcissistic desire for self-sufficiency continues the revolt of the male against the female, of the individual against nature and history, of history itself against geography, etc. In La Mer (167-68) he attributes “tout le progrès du monde” to this “belle folie” and in the Histoire de France (I, 451) he declares, with a mixture of admiration and reprobation, of the homosexuality of the Knights Templar: “Ce qu’il y a de souverainement diabolique dans le diable, c’est de s’adorer.” Primitive forms of birth control, the refusal to fecundate, are likewise the work of the devil (Histoire de France, IV, 443-46), who serves, with Cain and Prometheus, as a figure of the male culture-hero.

73 Origines du droit, xxvi, 152-53.

74 Le Peuple, 263.
instituted, a transgression against the law of nature, the repression of the female by the male. "Ce créateur, ce Dieu tyran, il a su faire une seconde nature dans la nature. Mais qu’a-t-il fait de l’autre, la primitive, sa nourrice et sa mère? Des dents qu’elle lui fit, il lui mordit le sein."

No doubt Michelet had not forgotten, from his early reading of Racine, the famous dream of Athalie, the daughter of Jezebel, in which she saw herself pierced by a dagger in the hands of a child, her own (grand-)child, or her final bitter cry, in defeat: "Dieu des Juifs, tu l'emportes." Michelet’s sorceress, likewise, is vanquished by her own son, the doctor. The history of Rome begins with the destruction of the mother-city, Alba. To advance the cause of freedom and civilization, Israel “a sacrifié les viandes et les oignons de l’Egypte et quitté sa riche vallée pour les roches du Cedron et les sables de la Mer Morte.” In the arid, infertile wastes where freedom flourishes, the only mer, it would appear, is morte.

The violence suffered by the mother, by the original unity, or community, is for Michelet the original crime, and while the incestuous desire to be reunited with the mother is almost always accompanied in the text by expressions of apprehension, greatest guilt — as well as greatest glory — attaches to the father or cruel son, the original blood-besmirched culture-hero. In the unfinished novel Sylvine, the Président, the deceased husband of Sylvine’s mistress, is guilty of an obscure, impenetrable, and inexpiable crime.

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75 La Mer, 258-59.
76 Histoire romaine, I, 102; La Sorcière, 32, 321; Introduction à l’histoire universelle, 39.
77 In the Journal the origin of history and social progress is a transgression against the natural condition of primitive communism: “Dranpadi, femme commune de ses frères. Nul individu encore que la communauté humaine, le polyier humain, union native, si unie qu’il n’y a pas même sentiment d’union. Mais la véritable individualité se révèle par la préférence. Elle en aima un, l’ama trop . . . dit le Mahabharat. N’est-ce pas Bima, le plus fort, celui qui la caressait plus longtemps? Ainsi commença l’amour exclusif, pere du progrès.” (II, 308) Michelet’s culture-hero is always, however, at the same time a parricide, for every father is also a son who has slain his father. All paternal authority is ultimately traceable to a crime. Thus the foundation of Rome is the slaying of Remus by Romulus (“le petit Remus” as Michelet interprets the name), and the slaying of Romulus by the patricians (Histoire romaine, I, 92-93). Yet this transgression is necessary, according to Michelet, since it launches mankind on its adventure in history. In turn, however, the authority of the patriarchs is revolted against by the sons. Hence England as champion of freedom — “L’héroïsme anglais devait commencer la liberté moderne. En tout pays, c’est d’abord par l’aристocratie, par l’héroïsme, par l’ivresse du moi humain que l’homme s'affranchit de l’autorité” (Introduction à l’histoire universelle, 69).
78 Sylvine: Mémoires d’une femme de chambre, published by Alcantar de Brah in
attenuating circumstances and his own gentle character, Louis XVI was guilty, according to Michelet, by the very fact of being a King, of violating France.79

Yet Michelet does not advocate punishment of the crime and return to the status quo ante. In Sylvine the President’s portrait hangs in a prominent place. The absent father continues to preside over the household. In the Histoire de la Révolution Michelet justifies those who voted for the death penalty for Louis XVI, but he protests the courage and patriotism of those who voted against it. Above all, the French people as a whole, the nation itself, is innocent. “Le peuple ne voulait pas sa mort.”80 Michelet’s aim is rather to quiet the cries of the mothers, the victims, to secure justice and a voice for them, but at the same time to release the living from their heritage of guilt, by bringing to consciousness and expressing in words what in its undeciphered, riddle-like form constitutes a menace to the rational man. It is impossible, Michelet believes, to repress the past or deny it, for it will return to haunt our dreams. It must be reconciled. “Il faut humaniser les affections, non les extirper.”81

The historian, according to Michelet, has a special relation to the mothers. In some pages of the Journal devoted to Rubens, Michelet remarks that the early life of the artist was dominated by his mother, “qui, comme on sait, était tout pour lui.”82 Elsewhere, he generalizes the relation of Rubens and his mother. Every artist for him is an Oedipus: “Les hommes supérieurs sont tous les fils de leur mère.”83 Haunted by his sense of a wholeness that has been mutilated and distorted by time, by culture, by personal identity, the artist accomplishes for his fellowmen what they dare not undertake for themselves. Crossing the frontiers that have been established to mark off life and death, culture and nature, self and other, he restores the broken links with the underworld, the mothers, the source and enveloping reality of life.

The fascination with transgression, the desire to break out of the confines of particular existence and to re-enter the continuity of the

Bibliothèque de l’Aristocratie, vols. CIX-CX, January-February, 1940.

79 Histoire de la Révolution, III, 83-84.

80 Ibid., III, 181.

81 Journal, I, 380 (1.3.1842). Cf. his comment on what he calls an essential characteristic of the eighteenth century, in La Sorcière, 245: “Plus sa surface, ses couches supérieures, furent civilisées, éclairées, inondées de lumière, plus hermétiquement se ferma au-dessous la vaste région du monde écclesiastique, du couvent, des femmes crédules, maladies et prêtres à tout croire.”

82 Journal, I, 442 (7.7.1842).

83 Le Prêtre, 297. (Italics in text)
world are as essential to Michelet’s writing as fear of the dissolution of identity. In the magnificent account of the whalefishers in *La Mer*, one of the most striking scenes is that of the sailors’ frenzied torturing of their victims. The characteristic exploitation of the homophony of *mer* and *mère* emphasizes the transgressional character of the scene. “On tuait pour tuer. Car comment profiter de cet abatis de colosse dont un seul a tant d’huiles et tant de sang? Que voulait-on dans ce sanglant déluge? Rougir la terre? Souiller la mer? On voulait le plaisir des tyrans, des bourreaux, frapper, sèvir, jouir de sa force et de sa fureur, sauver la douleur, la mort. Souvent on s’amusait à martyriser, désespérer, faire mourir lentement des animaux trop lourds, ou trop doux, pour se revancher. Péron vit un matelot qui s’acharnait ainsi sur la femelle d’un phoque; elle pleurait comme une femme, gémissait, et chaque fois qu’elle ouvrait sa bouche sanglante, il frappait d’un gros aviron, et lui cassait les dents.”

Equally troubling are the passages in the *Journal*, in which Michelet tells of his avid observation of the corpses of Pauline Rousseau and Madame Dumesnil. In the account he gives of his relations with Athénais Mialaret in the same text, he emphasizes above all his fascination — a fascination illuminated by insight — with the fissure, the opening, with vomiting, menstruating, urinating, defecating, copulating, almost all of which were difficult for Athénais.

Everywhere in Michelet’s writing supreme importance is attached to the task of opening the passages that link life and death, present and past, self and world, and it is to the historian-artist in particular that this task is assigned. In *La Mer*, we read of an old inhabitant of Mont Saint-Michel, still mourning the loss of his “brother,” whom the sea has claimed as its victim, yet constantly assailed, haunted, fascinated by “la terrible fée” and unable to leave her vicinity. The old man turns out to be an artist. Likewise, no reader of *La Montagne* is likely to forget the extraordinary account Michelet gives of taking the mud baths at Acqui. For Michelet this was a veritable journey backward in time, even, he claims, beyond self-consciousness, to complete identification with the mother, *terra mater*.

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84 *La Mer*, 328.
85 *La Mer*, 15-17.
As reformer, friend of Bérenger, inheritor of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, Michelet never ceased to emphasize his commitment to progress, differentiation, discrimination, to prose rather than poetry, history rather than myth. He did not question the validity or cultural usefulness of property. As champion of the disinherited, however, he was always drawn back to the nameless crowd out of which all individuality emerges. In the epilogue to La Sorcière he tells of watching the dawn rise above Toulon where his book, itself a celebration of the last of the sibyls, had just been finished. “Une grande merveille allait venir, éclater et éclipser tout,” he writes. “On la laissait venir, on ne la pressait pas. La transfiguration prochaine, les ravissements espérés de la lumière, n’ôtaient rien au charme profond d’être encore dans la nuit divine, d’être à demi caché, sans se bien démêler du prodigieux enchantement. . . . Viens, Soleil! On t’adore d’avance, mais tout en profitant de ce dernier moment de rêve . . .” 87 “Une larme encore,” he pleads in the Journal, “et puis je vous suis.” 88 In the 1869 preface to the Histoire de France he justifies the sympathy with which, as a young historian, he had treated the Middle Ages in the first two volumes: “Voulez-vous bien savoir pourquoi j’étais si tendre pour ces dieux? c’est qu’ils meurent. Tous à leur tour s’en vont. Chacun, tout comme nous, ayant reçu un peu l’eau lustrale et les pleurs, descendent aux pyramides, aux hypogées, aux catacombes. Hélas, qu’en revient-il?” 89

Like the intrepid pilots of the Gironde, in La Mer, who maintain the link between the domesticated river and the open sea, the historian — “le roi des morts,” “le grand pasteur des ombres” 90 — is a mediator between the upper and the nether worlds, joining what time and culture have sundered or repressed, 91 extending the realm of the intelligible until it embraces what reason itself has rejected. “Je chaleur sociale, où se garde le trésor de la vie universelle, où se rouvri raient pour tous les sources taries de l’amour.”

87 La Sorcière, 323.
88 Journal, I, 517 (5.8.1843.) Cf. a passage from one of Michelet’s early lectures (June 17, 1839): “Quelque regret que nous gardions dans nos cœurs pour les premières années de l’enfance, il faut aller ailleurs. Tout est là en histoire. Il faut tout à la fois regretter et point regretter, garder au passé un souvenir légitime, reconnais-sant et tendre et ne pas oublier que nous devons faire autre chose” (quoted in Haac, 103).
90 La Sorcière, 96.
91 “En vain on crut bâtir un mur infranchissable qui eût fermé la voie d’un monde à l’autre; j’ai des ailes aux talons, j’ai volé par-dessus” (ibid.). Childhood and death are
France commands her historians. Their task is to attend to the wordless signs of the past and give a tongue to that which is anterior to the discourse of reason. “Il faut le rameau d’or,” Michelet writes. “Ces morts . . . il leur faut un Oedipe, qui leur explique leurs propres énigmes dont ils n’ont pas eu le sens, qui leur apprenne ce que voulaient dire leurs paroles, leurs actes, qu’ils n’ont pas compris . . . Il faut faire parler les silences de l’histoire, ces terribles points d’orgue, où elle ne dit plus rien et qui sont justement ses accents les plus tragiques. Alors seulement les morts se résignent au sépulcre.”93 The goal of history-writing for Michelet is thus at the same time the reparation of a wrong and the conjuring of a danger. The historian’s role is to heal the scar of the Caesarian section, to restore continuity to the discontinuous and thereby, while rehabilitating the past, to justify the present and reveal a destiny.

Among historians, according to Michelet, the historian of France is privileged, in that in principle the history of France alone among the nations is a perfect continuity. “Toute autre histoire est mutilée, la nôtre seule est complète.”94 But in the successive revolutions of time this continuity is constantly being denied or disfigured, and it is the historian’s task to preserve and restore it. Thus he must recover the link with the Revolution, which the Restoration had tried to represent as an aberration — “un désordre, un non-sens, une pure négation” — and, beyond the Revolution, with “l’ancienne France,” which the Revolution itself had tried to erase. “Il n’a pas tenu aux politiques que le peuple ne devint table rase, ne s’oublie lui-même.”95 Correspondingly, Michelet also saw it as his mission in the contemporary world to heal the social and cultural division of the two Frances.96 The historian of the Revolution never tired of affirming the fundamental unity of the Revolution and the relative unimportance within it of factional divisions.97 The Revolution thus came to stand for a unity which had been betrayed or forgotten and Michelet unceasingly called on his contemporaries to fulfill its prom-

94 Le Peuple, 246.
95 Ibid., 9, note.
ise. The texts are full of appeals for national unity and for an end to class conflict. All Frenchmen, for Michelet, are the children of the Revolution. Throughout his work, as in the youthful fantasies he committed to the Journal of 1820-21, Michelet cast himself in the role of savior and mediator.98

The condition of the historian’s descent into the nether world is that, like the poet and the priest, he must die to the world. Following a tradition that many poets but few historians before him had invoked, Augustin Thierry claimed that his historical insight was never greater than after he began to lose the sight of his eyes.99 Every now and again the Michelet of the Journal reproaches himself

98 Cf. an entry in the Journal for 1820: “Je vois . . . un grand coquin de gendarme . . . jasant d’une manière fort dégagée avec une petite fille assez bien faite. La petite l’écoutait en baissant les yeux. J’aurais voulu aller à la petite et lui montrer qu’on ne voulait que s’amuser d’elle” (Écrits de jeunesse, 91). A month later he notes seeing “un gros jeune charretier qui jouait très indiscrètement . . . avec une toute petite fille” (ibid., 96). Two months later it is a young laborer that is being struck by his older mates: “Mon coeur s’est serré à la vue de ce sang qui coulait, de la manière la plus douloureuse . . . C’était surtout l’idée d’un inférieur molesté par ses supérieurs et supportant des injures pour gagner son pain” (ibid., 112). In the Spring of 1821 he records a dream in which “je sauvais une jeune fille vendue par sa mère à M. de Richelieu” (ibid., 141) — a striking prefiguration of the subsequent presentation in the Journal of his encounter with his second wife, Athénais Mialaret. In the Histoire de France the role of the seducer or rapist is played by England, that of the victim Michelet intervenes to save by France, specifically by Joan of Arc: "Les Anglais, en brûlant la Pucelle et voulant la violer, croyaient dépuceler la France" (Journal, I, 247). Elsewhere the victim is Ireland or Poland, the rapist England or Russia, the mediator Michelet-France. Michelet’s friend and associate Edgar Quinet also saw himself as the savior of the offended and the humiliated. He recalls having fallen in love, as a young man, with “la belle victrice” in Racine’s Iphigénie (Histoire de mes idées in Oeuvres complètes [Paris, Germer-Baillière et cie., n.d.], X, 80-81) and years later notes on a visit to Greece that “jamais Athènes ne m’eut paru si belle qu’aussi, livrée, abandonnée toute seule à ses persécuteurs” (letter of 26.4.1829 in Oeuvres complètes [Paris, 1875], XIX, 112). While certain of Michelet’s remarks concerning his mother in the early journal reveal great anxiety and even the feeling that he was responsible for her death, in subsequent texts he presents himself as the savior of the family and the mediator between the past, with its injustices, and the future, in which wrongs will be righted: “Mes parents, gens modestes, dont quelques-uns ont enfoui dans l’obscurité des dons supérieurs n’ont voulu vivre qu’en moi . . . Moi, je devais tout réparer, tout sauver” (Le Peuple, 13, 20). Freud’s paper on the lover as rescuer is clearly relevant here; see “A special type of choice of object made by men. Contributions to the psychology of love, I” (1910), Standard Edition, XI, 163-75.

99 “J’avais tout juste assez de vue pour me conduire; mais en présence des édifices ou des ruines, dont il s’agissait de reconnaître l’époque ou de déterminer le style, je ne sais quel sens intuitif venait aux secours de mes yeux. Animé par ce que j’appellerais volontiers la passion historique, je voyais plus loin et plus nettement” (Augustin Thierry, Dix Ans d’études historiques, Paris, 1834, Preface, p. xxvii). The sexual symbolism of blindness is hard to overlook in Thierry’s case. His blindness was part of a general paralysis that affected his entire body.
for withdrawing from the life of the world around him, for having driven Pauline to drink and an early death by his neglect of her, for not having spent enough time with his daughter Adèle. But these are passing doubts. The theme of sacrifice and mutilation, important in Thierry’s work and in his reflections on history, is central throughout Michelet’s. The King of France — to return to a passage with which we began — is “calme et insignifian,” “pâle et médiocre,” compared to the redfaced, sensual kings of England, but because of this, female-like, he grows “d’une végétation puissante, d’une progression lente, continue et fatale comme la nature.” In the same way, the centre of France is defined negatively: “pays remarquablement plat, pâle, indécis.” The Seine, the river of France, “le premier des fleuves, le plus civilisable, le plus perfectible,” has not the lively, local character of the Loire or the Garonne; most significantly, it lacks the violent desire, “la terrible impétuosité du Rhône, qui tombe comme un taureau échappé des Alpes, perce un lac de dix-huit lieues, et vole à la mer, en mordant ses rivages.” But this character of generality, this sacrifice of strongly marked individual traits, are what has made the Île de France and Paris the center of France and the true locus of French nationality. So also France itself occupies in relation to the rest of Europe the place that the Île de France occupies in relation to the rest of France.

Like his heroes (historical or geographical), the historian renounces his own life and personality in order to internalize those of others, the world of the past and of the mothers. “Il faut vivre et mourir comme un livre, et non comme un homme,” says the writer of the Journal. As Paris, according to Michelet, is the “sensorium” of France, the historian can claim to have all the nations within

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100 *Journal*, I, 376 (11.1.1842); II, 527 (12.6.1860); II, 536 (28.6.1860); II, 544 (2.8.1860); et passim.
101 *Histoire de France*, I, 290. Similarly Michelet presents Caesar, the conquerer of worlds, as in part passive and feminine (*Histoire romaine*, Book III, ch. 5).
102 *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, 62.
103 “Tableau de la France,” in *Histoire de France*, I, 221.
104 *Journal*, I, 270 (28.7.1838); I, 290-91 (2.2.1839) on Paris as epitome of the Universe; *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, 61-63.
105 *Journal*, I, 330 (23.6.1840). Cf. *ibid.*, I, 326; I, 366; II, 536; and I, 416: “J’ai eu le génie maternel,” or I, 590: “Tu es la matrice féconde . . . Fais comme la femme enceinte, qui fait tout en vue de son fruit.” Michelet’s contemporary, Leopold von Ranke, had a similar conception of the historian’s need to sacrifice his individual personality: “Das Ideal historischer Bildung würde darin liegen, dass das Subjekt sich rein zum Organ des Objekts, nämlich der Wissenschaft selbst machen könnte, ohne durch die natürlichen oder zufälligen Schranken des menschlichen Daseins daran gehindert zu werden, die volle Wahrheit zu erkennen und darzustellen” (to Max-
himself, all classes and all individuals. “Dieu m’a donné, par l’histoire, de participer à toute chose.” Thus Michelet can announce in the letter to Quinet with which he prefaced *Le Peuple* that “ce livre . . . c’est moi-même . . . Je suis resté peuple.” Correspondingly, in a letter to Eugène Noël, the historian of France declares that he himself is the subject of his book. “Je suis la France.”

But even at moments of apparently total passivity, of complete abandonment of his particular identity, the historian never loses himself. Though he makes himself little more than an intense watching and listening, he remains distinct from his history, and in the end his self-effacement comes to look like a ruse to achieve control. In a remarkable passage of the Journal for June, 1860, Michelet recounts the first meeting, after years of bitterness and distrust, of Athénais Mialaret, his second wife, and Alfred Dumesnil, his friend and assistant, the son of a woman he had loved and the widower of Adèle Michelet, his daughter from his first marriage to Pauline Rousseau. In a moment of perfect vision the discontinuities of time and human personality are overcome, and Michelet perceives through his crystalline lens the unity of all the parts of himself that have been fragmented over the years and dispersed among those he has loved — that have been loved and longed for, indeed, in them. At once subject and object of his vision, see-er and seen, he knows briefly what his sorceress called “la joie sauvage d’être un monde qui se suffit à lui-même.”

Ce qui dominait . . . c’était le plaisir de voir que tous deux s’entendaient, s’appréciaient mieux. Il sent, je crois, l’admirable harmonie qui est en elle. Et elle admire ses côtés exquis, élevés, singuliers, d’un rêveur, pourtant si pratique en même temps, sa situation attendrissante entre ces enfants, ces vieillards pour qui il est obligé d’être mère, d’être femme, et femme attentive. Rien de plus poétique que cette maison, avec son jeune maître qui en contient le passé, la jeune maîtresse accidentelle qui l’enchaîne pour un moment. Les vieux arbres en ont souli, le jardin s’en est embelli et le retour des verveines, qu’aimait l’autre autant que celle-ci, semble un ravissement aimable du passé dans le présent. Charmante confusion des âmes qui ne se sont pas connues! Je la

__imilian II of Bavaria, 26.11.1859, Sämtliche Werke [Leipzig, 1873-90], LIII-LIV, 404-405.\

retrouvais encore hier, en voyant ma femme aimer et caresser les animaux, comme faisait ma première femme. Toutes deux et Mme Dumesnil me semblèrent un moment mêlées en une seule personne.  

The prominence of seeing in Michelet, the unrelenting effort to control and appropriate the other with the eye, noticeable enough in the early Journal of 1820-21, culminates, in the later Journal, in the pervasive theme of the hero’s attempt to insinuate himself, notably at the critical moments of the menstrual cycle, into the intimacy of his wife. Not only does he probe her past and try to repossess it by writing her biography, he becomes the privileged witness of her most private functions, menstrual and intestinal.  

His rivals are the priest, the doctor and the femme de chambre, those who are admitted to the secrets of the woman — a position that, for Michelet, far more than the bed or the heart, belongs properly to the husband. “Mariage,” he declares in L’Amour, “c’est confession.” The wife is the husband’s “spectacle,” his “divine comédie.” Ideally she is confined to the house, essentially sickly or bed-ridden, “tota morbus,” existing only for him, at once his prisoner and his idol. Michelet’s ideal husband, correspondingly, is garde-malade, serving-maid, priest, doctor, and witness of the mother-goddess-wife. Seeing, possession without aggression, substitutes easily in the Journal for the ordinary physical relations that Athénaïs’s fragile health and congenital malformation apparently made difficult. And, like other relations, seeing has its preparations and its climaxes. The moment of consummation for Michelet is the moment at which he can say: “Je sus, je vis le fond des coeurs.”  

The activity of writing itself appears to have been a means, for


111 Journal, II, 58, 139, 324, 327, 341, 393, et passim. Cf. also Claude Digeon, “Note sur le Journal de Michelet, années 1870-1874,” Annales Universitatis Saraviensis, série Philosophie, Beiheft 1, 1959. For the early journal entries, see note 98 supra.  

112 L’Amour, 339, 150.  

113 Ibid., 123, 148-49: Journal, II, 58, 293, 324, 398, 521.  

114 L’Amour, 27.
Michelet, of overcoming time and otherness, of appropriating the world and reappropriating the parts of the self that have been “lost” to the world. Once again, renunciation and sacrifice are the conditions of success. In the early Journal for 1820-21 and in his letters to his friend Poinsot, Michelet frequently presents himself as longing for a relation of transparency and immediacy. An early Journal entry discloses the narcissistic character of this longing. “C’est pour faire connaissance avec vous, mon cher moi,” Michelet notes, “que je vous écris cette lettre, qui ne sera pas la dernière.” Inevitably the desired relation with Poinsot was more closely approximated in the latter’s absence than in his presence. “C’est sur papier plutôt encore que dans nos conversations que je veux épancher mon coeur,” Michelet writes. Self-scrutinizing and self-dramatizing as always, he records with interest a trait of Rousseau’s that he found in the Confessions and claims to find also in himself — “c’est de n’éprouver qu’éloigné de ce qu’on aime, les transports, l’attendrissement de l’amour, de l’amitié.” In the Mémorial he recounts that the reading of La Pucelle inflamed his senses — this note throws an interesting light on Michelet’s lifelong concern with the Joan of Arc story — and he reflects: “C’est peut-être à cause de ce plaisir solitaire que j’ai dans la suite trouvé de la volupté dans plusieurs choses faites dans la solitude.” No doubt Michelet did not think of including writing among those “jouissances solitaires” in which he appears to have sought the momentary sense or illusion of combining abandonment and control, subject-ness and object-ness, of being self and other in one — and which he later declared “déplorables.” Yet on one occasion, when he found he was less enchanted than usual on seeing Poinsot, he himself provides the explanation: “Je venais de m’épuiser sur le papier.”

The pattern that can be discerned in the record of Michelet’s early relation to Poinsot recurs throughout his career. “Timide par les habitudes d’une vie toujours solitaire,” he remarks late in life in a manuscript note quoted by Viaillaneix, “je ne prenais jamais plaisir

118 Correspondance Michelet-Poinsot, 8.6.1820, Écrits de jeunesse, 264.
119 Journal, 20.5.1820, Écrits de jeunesse, 80.
120 L’Amour, 3.
121 Écrits de jeunesse, 102.
aux grandes réunions des hommes; absentes, je les enviais pourtant, les regrettais, les désirais." And in the 1869 Preface to the Histoire de France: "Vaste sympathie pour l'homme (que je ne voyais guère), pour la société, le monde (que je ne fréquentais jamais)." While he played almost no part in the revolutions of his own time, one of the high points of Michelet's writing is the Fête of the Federations of 1790, that time out of time that is evoked in a famous chapter of the Histoire de la Révolution and that he presents as a moment of complete transparency of each to all, of France to herself. The ideal seems not to have altered greatly since the early letters to Poinson, and again Michelet seeks to approach it through writing. It is not hard to see why Michelet so often identified himself with France. The peculiarity of France among the nations, according to him, is not only that she includes them all and that her duration is unbroken, but that she combines continuity and consciousness of her continuity. She knows and sees herself as one and indivisible. She not only makes history, she writes it, and writing it, makes it — "elle fait l'histoire et la raconte" — thus repossessing herself constantly, taking her past selves up in her present one, acting as the Prometheus of her own continuous identity, to use an image Michelet was fond of.

In solving the riddle, Oedipus the transgressor destroys the terrible power of the Sphinx, the embodiment of primitive lack of identity, woman and animal in one. In giving a voice and words to the past, the people, the mothers — the ambiguous mère-marâtre and peuple-populace — in "deciphering their riddles," the historian defines the undefined, tames the chthonic forces of the underworld, and ensures that victory of spirit over matter, of law over grace, of speech over silence, and more specifically, of history over myth, and prose ("voix virile") over poetry ("jeune fille au douteux langage"), which by Michelet's own account, is the theme of his narrative and the goal of history. The language of symbol, he explains in Les Origines du droit, like that of nature, is always equivocal. "Tout symbole est une équivoque, ainsi que toute poésie. La nature elle-même est-elle autre chose? Voyez comme elle se joue dans l'ilusion des formes vivantes, dans cette sophistiqué féconde, où

122 Viallaneix, La Voie royale, 95; "Préface de 1869," Histoire de France, I, 8.
123 "... profond regard de la France sur la France, ... conscience intérieure qu'elle a de ce qu'elle fit" ("De la méthode et de l'esprit de ce livre," Histoire de la Révolution, 2:115). In Le Peuple, p. 7, France is distinguished from Germany and England which "ne peuvent se voir elles-mêmes."
124 Introduction à l'histoire universelle, 65.
125 Origines du droit, lxi.
The historian's aim is thus not opposed to that of the father. On the contrary. But his method is appropriation, not subjection, seduction, not conquest. In an important passage of the 1869 Preface the persona of the historian tells of having been warned by the sages, the philosophers, of the danger of living in too close proximity to "l'autre monde." "On risque d'y trouver la blanche fiancée, si pâle et si charmante, qui boit le sang de votre cœur." For the men of reason, past and present, unconscious and conscious, the world of the mothers and the world of the fathers, are absolute, uncommunicating opposites, and must remain so. Consciousness, sanity and law are maintained only by excluding and repressing their opposite terms. They recommend, therefore, that the artist arm himself at least, like Aeneas, with a sword — "pour chasser ces images, ne pas être pris de trop près (ferro diverberat umbras)." The artist-historian, however, vehemently rejects their advice, refusing to found authority on an endless repetition of the father's original act of violence. "L'épée! triste conseil ... Quelle funeste sagesse! ... Oh! que les philosophes ignorent parfaitement le vrai fond de l'artiste, le talisman secret qui fait la force de l'histoire, lui permet de passer, repasser à travers les morts!" The artist-historian thus renounces the instrument of aggression. But not the prize of possession. "Sachez donc, ignorants, que sans épée, sans armes, sans quereller ces âmes confiantes qui réclament la résurrection, l'art, en les accueillant, en leur rendant le souffle, l'art pourtant garde en lui sa lucidité tout entière."²²⁷

¹²⁶ Ibid., xciii-xcv.
¹²⁷ "Préface de 1869," Histoire de France, I, 7. See also Bible de l'humanité (pp. 22-24) on the domestication of the elephant by the Hindu — "victoire toute de l'âme." The opposition of the man of reason and the man of feeling, the philosopher and the artist, is reflected in the inevitable opposition of England and France. The material victories of England, the aggressor, the rapist, will be overshadowed in the end, Michelet prophesies, by the spiritual victory of France, whose weakness will be shown to have been strength. Love of conquest is only the pretext of France's wars, according to Michelet. Their real motive is the desire to proselytize. "Le Français veut surtout imposer sa personnalité aux vaincus, non comme sienne, mais comme type du bon et du beau" — and in the end this "ridiculous" endeavor, like that of the Christians, will succeed. "Les Anglais ne trouvent que simplicité dans ces guerres sans conquêtes. Ils ne voient pas que nous ne manquons le but mesquin de l'intérêt immédiat que pour en atteindre un plus haut et plus grand" (Introduction à l'histoire universelle, 64). The
It may be possible to interpret, in the light of this general strategy of the artist, not only Michelet's dislike of Christianity, which he came to see increasingly as a religion of fanatical exclusiveness,\(^\text{128}\) and his rejection of the class struggle as an essential category of his thinking on social reform, in favor of nationalism, the myth of the people one and undivided, but even perhaps his attraction to history itself, and his conception of it as avoiding the antinomies of fact and fiction, object and subject. The historian's task, as he saw it, was neither to invent nor simply to reflect the universe, neither to impose an order on it, like aristocratic and imperialist England, nor to submit passively to it, like India or Germany. In contrast to the writer of fiction, as Michelet understood fiction, the historian is not free, his work is not an expression of pure subjectivity but is based on written sources and, above all, on the texts of other historians. Equally, however, in Michelet's view, the historian should not submit as completely to his sources as some historians of the Restoration had wanted to do, notably Prosper de Barante, the author of the *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne*.\(^\text{129}\) The historian, for Michelet, is an interpreter, and interpretation, as he understands it — the triumph of the man of reason and the man of feeling is also implicit in Michelet's opposition of the father and the son. The son is indeed the father's rival for the mother but, unlike the father, he is always innocent — "l'innocent rival." Michelet's image of the artist, and of himself, is of a castrato, and he presents those who find the way back to nature, to the mother, as mutilated. Virgil, whom he claims, along with Vico, as his master, is "le grand poète mutilé par la dureté du temps, par sa timidité, par l'humble servitude où le tenaient ses maîtres" (*Le Banquet*, 267). Lamarck is not just conventionally "cet aveugle Homère de Muséum." It is because of his disability that "demi-aveugle, à tâtons, il toucha intrépidement mille choses dont les clairvoyants n'osaient approcher encore" (*La Mer*, 150, 152). The movement of discovery, in short, is a disemboweling one; blindness does not accompany every insight but is the precondition of total vision.


\(^{129}\) "De ces chroniques naïves, de ces documents originaux, j'ai tâché de composer une narration suivie, complète, exacte," Barante declared in the important Preface to the *Ducs de Bourgogne* (ed. of Paris, 1824, I, xl-xli), adding that one condition of achieving this goal was "de faire disparaitre entièrement la trace de mon propre travail, de ne montrer en rien l'écrivain de notre temps." On Barante, see the article by Bann, cited note 3 above, and the substantial chapter in B. Reizov, *Frantsuskaya romanicheskaya istoriographia* (Leningrad, 1956), 123-72. On Michelet's dislike of the novel, the expression, for him, of unrepentant and shameless subjectivity, see the
of the spirit over the letter, of determinancy over the threatening indeterminacy of dream and “divine night”, of the present over the past, the subject over the object — is not an act of subjection or a harsh coercion, but a subtle appropriation. One of the most revealing of the many metaphors of the historian in Michelet’s work is that of the Roman judge. “C’est un beau et religieux spectacle,” he writes in the *Origines du droit*, “de voir avec quel scrupule le juge romain se laisse pousser d’interprétation en interprétation hors de la loi écrite, marchant, traîné plutôt, et ne convenant jamais qu’il a marché. Il faut voir comme il ruse avec le vieux texte, comme il arrache de l’impitoyable airain des pensées de douceur et d’équité qui n’y furent jamais.”

Thus, as he had said earlier in the *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, “la liberté ruse avec la fatalité, ainsi le droit va s’humanisant par l’équivoque.”

The historian’s condition — neither absolute independence nor absolute dependence but an unending labor of interpretation and appropriation — resembles the paradoxical condition of the lover, as Michelet understood it. The Michelet of the Journal expresses this paradox as the persistence of separation in the very moment when it appears to have been overcome, a persistence that is both regretted and welcomed. The dissolution of individual identity, by which the lover is fascinated, would mean, according to the Michelet of the Journal, the end of love’s longing. In *La Mer*, the paradox reappears in the unforgettable image of the male and the female whale, tall and erect “like the twin towers of Notre Dame,” straining desperately to consummate their love. In the *Histoire de la Révolution*, the narrator interrupts his narrative to lament the disillusionment that accompanies the apparent fulfillment of desire. “Hélas! l’expérience du monde nous apprend cette chose triste, étrange à dire, et pourtant vraie, que l’union trop souvent diminue dans l’unité. La volonté de s’unir, c’était déjà l’unité des coeurs, la meilleure unité peut-être.”


Michelet often uses this word with the traditional (and incorrect) etymology of Lat. *religare* (to bind) in mind.

*Origines du droit*, xcvi. Cf. in the early *Discours sur l’unité de la science*, the praise of translation, because it is “à la fois semblable et différente” (*Ecrits de jeunesse*, 296).

*Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, 42. On interpretation as disciplined liberty (“sauver l’ancienne foi en lui ménageant le prôgès”), see the passages on Abelard and Luther, *Histoire de France*, III, 22 and 195.

*Journal*, II, 17 (30.1.1849).

*La Mer*, 242.

*Histoire de la Révolution*, I, 257.
writing, the completion of the book, marks a painful moment. On the very threshold of its consummation, the intimacy in which the writer has lived with the past, his sense of being at the same time one with it and distinct from it, is seen to be illusory. The longed for jouissance — whether of the lover, of the hero, or of the historian — turns out to be solitary, and the jouisseur is overwhelmed by sadness. In the fourth book of the Histoire de France the narrator suspends his narrative of events to dramatize himself and the enterprise of the writer of history, and to draw a parallel between the writer’s quest and that of his heroes:

Il appartient à Dieu de se réjouir de son œuvre et de dire: Ceci est bon. Il n’en est pas ainsi de l’homme. Quand il a fait la sienne, quand il a bien travaillé, qu’il a bien couru et sué, quand il a vaincu, et qu’il le tient enfin, l’objet adoré, il ne le reconnaît plus, le laisse tomber des mains, le prend en dégoût, et soi-même . . . Il n’a réussi, avec tant d’efforts, qu’a s’ôter son Dieu. Ainsi Alexandre mourut de tristesse quand il eut conquis l’Asie, et Alaric quand il eut pris Rome. Godefroi de Bouillon n’eut pas plus tôt la terre sainte qu’il s’assit découragé sur cette terre, et languit de reposer dans son sein. Petits et grands, nous sommes tous en ceci Alexandre et Godefroi. L’historien comme le héros.

Le sec et froid Gibbon lui-même exprime une émotion mélan-colique, quand il a fini son ouvrage. Et moi, si j’ose aussi parler, j’entrevois avec autant de crainte que de désir, l’époque où j’aurai terminé la longue croisade à travers les siècles que j’entreprends pour ma patrie.136

The completion of the book, in short, its attainment of an autonomous existence, independent of its author, marks the point at which the historian loses control of it and his euphoric sense of the world as continuous with his self is destroyed. It is the moment at which time and otherness reassert themselves, the historian is returned to his partial and contingent existence, and the Caesarian scar reappears.

The impossible love of the serving-maid for her mistress in Sylvine, which writers on Michelet have usually ignored or dismissed as a pastiche of the pornographic novels of the eighteenth century, sheds valuable light on the historian’s enterprise, revealing as it does the lengths the historian-son will go to, the disguises he will put on,

the detours he will follow, the sacrifices he will make to recover the mother, his origin and his past, while avoiding the danger of being devoured by her. Though the references to the *reine du Levant* and the ten thousand years of waiting seem to invite a mythical reading of the novel, in terms, for instance, of the dream of a reconciliation of nature and culture, the mode of narration — a first-person account by Sylvine herself — makes reflexiveness the dominant characteristic of the text and throws into relief the seductiveness of the hero(ine), and the desire for control that underlies it.

Elle était assise, et moi à ses pieds, l’adorant, la contemplant de mes yeux humides. Les siens étaient moites aussi. Enfin, par un geste charmant, tirant un peu cette ample robe, d’un beau pli, d’une onde de soie, elle embrassa ma nudité et me fit d’elle un petit nid à sa gauche, tout près de son cœur et sous sa belle mamelle. De ma tête qu’elle serrait par moments je la comprimais, j’en sentais l’élasticité, je n’osais pas parler dans un si grand bonheur. Enfin, timidement, je lui dis : ‘Que je vous attendais! que je vous ai rêvé! que je vous admire et vous aime! Ce rêve m’est resté dix mille ans. Vous me croyez bien jeune. Erreur.

Oh! que je suis vieille déjà dans l’amour et l’espoir de vous! ... Toujours je croyais voir venir à l’horizon la reine adorée du Levant, si belle, si aimable, mon aurore, mon désir! Je vous ai donc ... Non, vous m’avez ... ô maîtresse, servez-vous de moi. Si je pouvais avoir en moi quelque chose à donner, qui pût vous faire plaisir! Hélas! je n’ai rien, je suis nue. Prenez mon cœur si plein de vous. Prenez-moi et usez de moi. J’en ai besoin ... Je sens ... et je désire ... je ne sais quoi ... au moins souffrir par vous.’

Elle ne disait pas un mot. Mais sur mon front, une petite pluie de gouttes tièdes, comme une averse de printemps, me disaient dans ce silence divin, que son charmant et tendre cœur débordait et coulait pour moi. Cela me troubla encore plus. Et je ne me connaissais plus, ces gouttes étaient brûlantes.

Du plus profond, elle tira un soupir, me dit : ‘Amour! Que ferai-je pour toi? ... Oh! oui, moi aussi j’y pensais. Depuis longtemps je te voulais et tu étais mon rêve. Chaque nuit, chaque jour, j’ai songé à ce doux enfant, une petite amie, toute neuve, un peu sauvage, et d’autant plus aimée, amie, amante, ma fille et mon petit mari, mon esclave et mon maître ... Car tu t’es ... Sur ma foi, mon royaume, c’est de t’obéir.’

En disant cette folle parole, elle me baisa d’amour, et tout s’abîma devant moi. Elle ajouta, riant, pleurant:

— Oh! quel bonheur, si je pouvais t’épouser! Hélas! je ne suis qu’une femme.
Je lui dis en pleurant aussi, comme un enfant eût fait: 
— Maman, épousez-moi tout de même.”137

The legendary quality of Michelet’s work, on which I dwelt at some length earlier in this paper, may now perhaps be reconsidered. If the Caesarian section and the tomb are figures, in Michelet’s writing, of every division — the division of the object and the subject, of mother and son, of past and present, of the prerational and the rational, of myth and history, and of what, to Michelet, was a division at the heart of language itself, between the letter and the spirit, the signifiant and the signifié — and if the historian’s task is to heal this division, not by the submission of the second set of terms to the first, nor by the coercion of the first set of terms by the second, but by the seduction, the appropriation of the first set of terms by the second, then the historian’s work itself must manifest the accomplishment of this task. Michelet intends, in his historical writing, to weave myth and history together in a seamless text, without being himself absorbed — as the rhapsode is in the oral community — by the myth and the tradition he carries forward. Like nature eternally creating and eternally destroying her children, the tradition eternally creates and destroys its particular manifestations. As a writer, however, and as one fully conscious of the power of myth, Michelet could hope to avoid the fate of the rhapsode and his song, to rise above tradition and myth and maintain his independence of them while at the same time embracing them, espousing them, in the way the diligent peasant, for him, espouses terramater, or a truly humane religion might espouse the mother cults it supplants.

Michelet’s ideal historian is a healer of wounds. He constitutes an identity, a tradition, and he thus shares some of the characteristics of the oral poet. He is, by definition, like the oral poet, a popular poet, the historian of an entire people, addressing himself to an entire people. It is not surprising that Michelet constantly reaffirmed the fundamental unity of the French people, calling upon his compatriots to heal their divisions and to fulfil the promise of the Federations of 1790. The role he assigned to the historian, and the role in which he cast himself, made sense only if he could address himself, over its divisions, to the whole people of France.

137 Sylvine: Mémoires d’une femme de chambre, 42-43. This text, published by Alcantar de Brahms in the rare Bibliothèque de l’Aristocratie (René Debresse, 38 rue de l’Université, Paris), January-February, 1940, vols. CIX-CX, is mentioned briefly by
But what if the act of writing, by which the work of restoring, or more accurately perhaps, of constituting unity has to be carried out, is itself an instrument of rupture, what if the cement (caementum) is inseparable from the etymologically related caesura (caesum)? Ranke has no doubt that national histories are proper to “nations which enjoy a literary culture.”

Michelet, for his part, was uncomfortably aware, all his life, of the gulf between popular culture or local cultures and his own literate, national culture, and he knew that the latter was disruptive of the former. He wrestled constantly with the problem of popular literature. He knew, above all, that despite his success he was not read by the common people, and that he had not, in the end, been able to catch the accent of the people in his writing. “Je suis né peuple,” he wrote, “j’avais le peuple dans le coeur . . . Mais sa langue, sa langue, elle m’était inaccessible. Je n’ai pas pu le faire parler.”

To Michelet the breach within the historian, as within every man, represented the mark of civilization, of the struggle of reason, spirit, the West, the male to separate themselves and establish their authority over their origins in nature, matter, the East, the female, and this struggle was enacted within every man as the attempt to realize and maintain a personal esser ce, an identity, against the threat posed by his own animal and material nature. But the breach was also the sign of a dangerous failure. The victory of reason would not be secure as long as the breach remained to signal a sphere in which nature still survived, maimed but untamed. The final triumph of reason, of civilization, required that the universe be completely permeated by them until nature herself was embraced in a world “sans couture” in Barthes’ phrase. Indeed, the world-historical significance of France, according to Michelet, was her destined realization of such a seamless world, a world in which “la société, la liberté ont dompté la nature, l’histoire a effacé la géographie . . . l’esprit a triomphé de la

Haac, but not listed in the bibliography of Michelet’s works at the end of Viallaneix. Barthes told me orally he did not know it, but Professor Viallaneix kindly confirmed its authenticity.

138 The Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke, ed. G. G. Iggers and K. von Moltke (Indianapolis, 1973), 151. Ranke seems to have experienced an identification with Germany not unlike Michelet’s identification of himself with France. For Ranke “our mother country . . . is with us, in us. Germany is alive in us, we represent it, willy-nilly, in every country to which we go, in each climate. We are rooted in it from the beginning, and we can never emancipate ourselves from it.” (“A Dialogue on Politics,” ibid., 116)

139 Quoted by Barthes, p. 175.
matière, le général du particulier, et l'idée du réel.”\textsuperscript{140} Michelet's attempt to heal the breach never implied, therefore, a renunciation of the goal of autonomy and power; rather it was part of his strategy for fulfilling that goal. In Rousseau's wish to have as his fatherland a happy and tranquil republic “dont l'ancienneté se perdit en quelque sorte dans la nuit des temps”\textsuperscript{141} Michelet could easily have recognized an anticipation of his own.

My reading of Michelet seems to me to raise a question concerning his relation to history and the mission he assigned to the historian. If identity, self-sufficiency, the gathering up of the many into the one, is the historian's ideal, then history itself, both as a succession of events and as a narrative of succession, must be evil, since it is separation, unceasing dispersal and division of the unitary.\textsuperscript{142} The ages of happiness, according to Hegel, are history's blank pages. Similarly for Michelet, writing the history of the Revolution, the spontaneous and sudden emergence of French unity and the revolutionary principle is the summit and transcendence of history. “Le reste est un néant. Ce néant, il a fallu toutefois le raconter longuement. Le mal, justement parce qu'il n'est qu'une exception, une irrégularité, exige, pour être compris, un détail minutieux. Le bien, au contraire, le naturel, qui va coulant de lui-même, nous est presque connu d'avance par sa conformité aux lois de notre nature, par l'image éternelle du bien que nous portons en nous. Les sources où nous puisions l'histoire en ont conservé précieusement le moins digne d'être conservé, l'élément négatif, accidentel, l'anecdote individuelle, telle ou telle petite intrigue, tel acte de violence.”\textsuperscript{143}

The historian is thus the enemy of history, as he is the enemy of nature. “Le récit,” as Barthes said, “est calvaire; le tableau est gloire.” The youthful devotee of Thomas à Kempis still dreams in his maturity of gathering up what has been dispersed by time, of establishing, by a process of subsumption, the primacy and authority of the one over the many, the same over the different, the universal over the particular. Like all the pious sons, he would find his way out of the land of Egypt, the inexhaustibly fertile valley that is death to the spirit. But his goal is not the aleatory existence of the nomad. On the

\textsuperscript{140} “Tableau de la France,” in \textit{Histoire de France}, 1, 226.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité}, “A la République de Genève.”
\textsuperscript{142} The mature Michelet might at any point have repeated the observation of the youthful one: “La vie ne me semble qu'une suite de séparations” (Journal, 7.5.1820, \textit{Écrits de Jeunesse}, 76).
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Histoire de la Révolution}, 1, 237.
contrary, the journey itself is experienced as an exile in the wilderness, endured only for the sake of that final homecoming, of which history has provided at least one revelation, in the Fête of the Federations of 1790.

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